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OR,

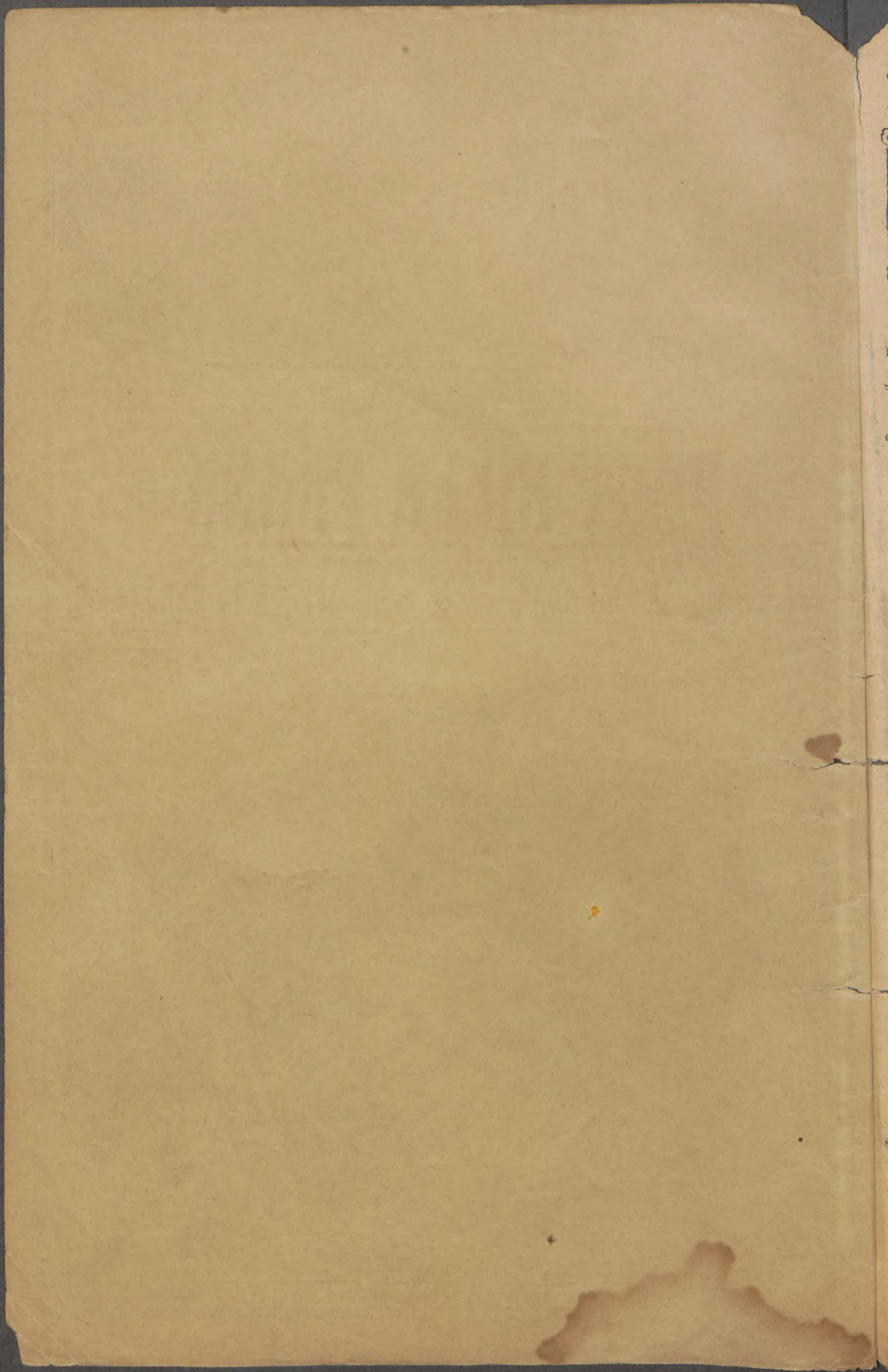
THE RIVALS OF THE ROAD.

BY

JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



A BULLET WHISTLED BACK FROM OUT THAT LITTLE CLOUD OF SMOKE COMING CLOSE TO FRANK'S EAR.



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Foot Hills Frank, THE FANCY SPORT; OR, THE RIVAL ROAD RAIDERS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "SPARKLER SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. BEAUTY IN DISTRESS.

"There's trouble ahead, I'm thinking, major!"

"Trouble, sergeant? Surely not—hark!"

From beyond yonder slight rise in the ground floated still other sounds in perfect keeping with those which had at first caught the attention of that little cavalcade: Major Dix Piety, quartermaster by appointment, now on his way to Fort Grant with an armed escort.

At the first sound of firearms that escort had closed in around the major, whose ruddy cheeks turned a shade or two paler as he gripped more tightly the precious package secured to the pommel of his saddle.

Sergeant Clutterbuck dashed on ahead, far enough for a glance over yonder rise, then wheeled his horse to trot back with his brief report.

Even as he spoke other shots came from that direction, accompanied by loud, fierce shouts; then—

"A woman, by Jove!" fairly exploded Major Piety as a shrill shriek was added to those ominous sounds.

The major was nothing if not gallant, even if he was "fair, fat, and (something more than) forty," and giving a little ejaculation he sent his sweat-marked steed forward, only drawing rein when he could win a fair view of what was then transpiring on the lower level.

A desperate struggle, where the odds were all on one side.

One man fighting madly, even while being borne helplessly to earth, and just beyond him was a feminine figure trying to break away from the rude clutches of another burly ruffian, shrieking and crying for help as only one of the fair sex can in time of sore peril.

Barely long enough to make out just this; then, his blood growing hot, Major Piety gave a shout, jerking revolver from holster as he spurred his steed to a headlong charge, sending a brace of bullets in advance as though to herald their coming.

For, as one man, the escort charged, unslinging carbines and hardly waiting for the word before rousing still further the echoes among yonder thick-lying rocks.

The surprise was complete, and without stopping to count the odds for or against their side, the outlaws leaped into saddle and skurried away in hot haste, dodging in among the rocks and scrubby growth of trees, firing no shot in return, nor taking any of the government lead with them, so far as could be seen.

Flung rudely aside when that mad rush was made, the woman stumbled and fell among the rocks; but she swiftly rallied, and without so much as a single glance toward the rescuing party, dropped to her knees beside the man who had fought so furiously, only to go down in defeat and seeming death just as help made itself evident.

"Oh, father! Dear Daddy! Speak to me, darling!" she wailed, arms encircling his form and lips stooping to touch his blood-stained face as sobs choked her utterance. "It's Alice—it's your own Daisy who—papa, papa!"

"Shall we pursue, major?" asked Sergeant Clutterbuck, as he rode beside his superior officer in that headlong charge. "Shall we—"

But the major had ears and eyes only for yonder wildly grieving maiden, just then, and wrenching up his horse as he drew nigh the spot, Piety fairly rolled

out of the saddle, for once forgetful of his precious charge in the interest excited by this lovely mourner.

"Got 'em again!" growlingly mumbled the sergeant as he missed his swift snatch at those reins, then wheeled horse in chase as the major's steed rushed off at a sharp angle. "Of all fools—so-ho, boy!"

"If I can help you, Miss—allow me to—eh?"

The major's pudgy hand was very light as it gently touched a bowed shoulder, but shrinking away with a cry of half-terror, half-anger, the fair being whom he sought to assure thus struck fiercely at his hand as she pantingly gasped:

"No, no, you—brute! You've murdered my—my dear old Daddy! I will never—never—"

Her voice faltered, and something of the truth seemed to force itself upon her overwrought brain.

A swift look around which took note of those boys in blue, only waiting for orders from their officers, then her face swiftly changed from horror to joy; for, just then a husky groan escaped the dusty lips of the being whom she was mourning as forever past recall to life!

"Daddy—oh, Daddy darling!"

"Daisy, my—my child! They haven't hurt—kill me, but don't—I'll die, for—for her, ye devils!"

Seemingly blinded by the blows which caused that flow of blood from his scalp, the man struggled to regain his feet, evidently mistaking Major Piety for one of his brutal assailants.

But the young woman—for young she was, and more than passing fair, as the gallant major told himself—was swifter to recognize the glad reality, and with a faint yet hysterical laugh she flung both arms around the major's neck, fairly kissing him in that glad delirium!

Then, before the gallant quartermaster could repay the gift in kind, the maiden was once again kneeling beside the injured man, sobbing and laughing, grieving and rejoicing all in one breath.

By this time the runaway horse was recaptured, and stiffly saluting the major, Sergeant Clutterbuck asked for orders.

"The enemy has run out of sight, sir, but if you deem best, maybe we can run 'em down, even yet," he added, with thinly veiled reproof lurking beneath his words.

The young woman caught her breath sharply at this, and a bit unsteadily ventured:

"Oh, sir, you will not—surely you will never—if those dreadful men should find us again, alone and—"

"Never mind; maybe we can dodge 'em, Daisy, pet," gloomily interposed the man, slowly rising to his feet and looking around in quest of his weapons which had stood him in such poor stead already. "I can fight—for you, my daughter! And—we're not beggars, gentlemen!"

If Major Piety had entertained any doubts as to his course this banished them, and he curtly bade the sergeant wait for the present.

"We're not out on the round-up for such cattle, sergeant. You might take a look around to see if all our lead was wasted, though. If not—well, leave 'em right where you find 'em!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck saluted stiffly, then turned away in grim silence, turning the major's mount over to a grizzled veteran, then slowly moving off along that line of flight, although none knew better than he how useless any such search must prove.

Flying targets are proverbially hard to hit, and doubly so from the saddle while racing across rough and broken ground. Not one of the audacious footpads had fallen out of saddle while in sight, nor had any of their number showed signs of being wounded.

Leaving the escort to occupy themselves after this fashion, Major Piety devoted his attention to father and

daughter, none the less ardently because of the fair one's gratitude for his timely coming.

"Only for you, sir! Only for your coming just then, we must have—oh, Daddy!"

"Don't mind her, major," huskily said the injured man, forcing a smile as eye met eye. "My little Daisy! Did you think—"

"They were killing you, Daddy! And I couldn't even help—"

"Killing, is it?" at the same time rising erect and stretching out his arms like a gladiator before the fight. "Do I look like a dead man? Never a bit, although—ugh!"

"You may be injured worse than you fancy, sir," hastily cut in the major, as the stranger flinched as if involuntarily from that ardent embrace. "If you would allow me to look at your wounds?"

"Just a few bats over the pate, major," quickly assured the other, brushing back a lock of blood-damp hair as it drooped over his forehead. "With a little water I'll be right as right. And—steady me a bit, Daisy! So! Dead? Never a bit of it, or I'm not Amity Sell!"

Crossing over to where a tiny stream led away from the little spring, father and child busied themselves for a brief space washing off the stiffening blood, soaking the scalp, then twisting all up in a handkerchief for lack of a better bandage.

Major Piety was willing enough to play surgeon with such a pretty assistant, but his services were scarcely required, and in a very few minutes the work was done, and he was listening to a hasty explanation from the lips of Mr. Sell.

A brief story, and that little crisply told.

Mr. A. B. Sell and his daughter, Alice Daisy, while journeying toward their far western home on horseback had been "held up" by road agents, or worse.

"They thought me worth fleecing, and if I had given up—but how could I?" muttered Mr. Sell, one arm drawing his child closer to his side. "It's all hers—all yours, Allie!"

"As though money would weigh in the balance as against your dear life, Daddy! And when—I thought they were murdering you, darling!"

"It was robbery, then, nothing worse, you reckon?" ventured Major Piety, his eyes turning instinctively toward the oil-cloth-covered bundle attached to his saddle. "Those devils robbed you, of course?"

"No, they didn't!" with a low chuckle and shake of his frosty pow. "I bluffed 'em off at first, but when they threatened Daisy—ah-h!"

Mr. Sell turned abruptly away, like one who wishes to hide some unusually powerful emotion, and the maiden swiftly whispered to the major:

"Dear Daddy! He fought them all—for me! And only for you, sir, we must both have perished! For—he's all I have left to live for, now, since—since mamma—died!"

Her musical voice choked, and her trim form shivered violently. It seemed as though she would sink down in pitiful weakness, now the reaction came, but of course Major Piety would not stand idly by and witness that! And so—well, those fair cheeks were softly suffused when, a few moments later, Miss Sell slipped away from the gallant officer at the coming of the grim old sergeant.

Clutterbuck saluted as he made report. Neither dead nor wounded were to be found, while the living had long since fled beyond eye-range.

"We have their horses, and there is nothing to hinder their going on their way," was his crisp addition. "As for ourselves, shall I sound boot and saddle, sir?"

Major Piety mechanically glanced toward the sun, yet quite a little ways

above the horizon; but as he did so, Daisy Sell gently, timidly touched an arm, breathing barely above her breath:

"If we might—would it be too great a favor, dear sir, to ask that—those horrid ruffians!"

"You're not fit to travel further just now, Miss Sell, and of course we can't—you can off-saddle, sergeant!"

"Pitch camp, is it, major?"

"Yes. A mile or two more or less can't make much difference. We'll have to camp out once more, anyway, so—you understand, Clutterbuck?"

The sergeant saluted stiffly, turning on his heel to stride away in grim submission; but through his grizzled beard came the surly growl:

"I knew it—just knew it! Let him clap eyes on a petticoat, and—well, of all fools, save me from an old—John donkey!"

CHAPTER II.

HOW THE MAJOR WAS REWARDED.

Little time was cut to waste when once the command had gone forth to pitch camp, and however strongly he may have doubted the advisability of such a course, Sergeant Clutterbuck permitted nothing of doubt or of disgust to show itself on the surface.

The brace of pack-mules were unloaded, and almost like magic a tidy little tent of white duck appeared nigh yonder spring of water, to which Major Piety gallantly conducted Miss Sell, begging the young lady to consider it hers, and all the escort her servants to command.

Her gratitude was prettily expressed, and as her plump hand gave him thanks, the quartermaster again bent his spine sufficiently far to press that fair member with his mustached lips; not once alone, but until Daisy blushing freed herself to retreat within that white refuge.

By this time Mr. Sell seemed to have fully rallied from his recent struggle, speaking and moving briskly enough, although the ominous red stains showed through his grotesque bandages, hinting at hurts severe enough to put almost any ordinary man "up in lavender" for the time being.

But the sturdy fellow made light of the matter when Major Piety spoke of it, waving away the proffered assistance.

"Don't mention it, sir! It's nothing—a cut or two, skin-deep; no more than that!"

"Well, of course, if you are quite certain?"

"I could dance a jig if it wasn't for the little girl," smilingly assured Mr. Sell, with a quick glance toward the tent inside of which Daisy had vanished from view. "She'd think me crazy, sure! And—well, poor child! she's had it tough enough, and that's a fact!"

Major Piety frowned a bit, just there, his head shaking on its short neck with added emphasis.

"Of course you are supposed to know your own business best, Mr.—ah—"

"Sell; Amity B. Sell, major!"

"Ah, thanks! As I was saying, of course I wouldn't venture to advise or reprove, sir, but, all the same, I can't rightly comprehend why you risk so much!"

"Meaning what, major?"

"Your daughter, sir! Surely you must have heard how this section is fairly cursed by road raiders? What with Captain North, and Captain South, and all their devils in human guise—"

"I know, sir," gravely interrupted Mr. Sell, lowering his voice and moving closer to the officer while adding: "And for that very reason I thought it best and safest to steer clear of the stage-lines and regular routes. For—in your ear, major!"

With grizzled beard almost touching that organ, Mr. Sell added:

"I've got a little fortune in notes and unset diamonds on my person, major! It's hers—all hers! And that's why I fought—hist!"

Mr. Sell broke off abruptly as his keen eyes took note of yonder moving door-flap, and when Daisy Sell stepped forth from the tent she merely saw two gentlemen in friendly converse.

Sergeant Clutterbuck seemed far less pleased at this growing intimacy than was the fair maiden, although he veiled his sentiment fairly well until what he deemed was the proper time for letting fall a modest warning in the ear of his superior officer.

That opportunity came when Major Piety looked after the good horse which had borne him safely so near his journey's end.

That important packet was gripped under an arm as Piety turned away in the direction of the tent, and Sergeant Clutterbuck spoke in low, guarded accents:

"Excuse me, sir, but you surely are not thinking of—well, sir, of course everything may be all right, but—I'd hardly put that man on guard duty over the money, your honor!"

"You mean—just what, Clutterbuck?"

"That he don't ring like pure metal, major! It's a mighty heap of money you've got done up there, sir—begging your pardon—and if I had my say about it, sir, we'd be hurrying right on for Fort Grant!"

The major gazed into that weather-beaten visage for a full minute, then slowly drawled forth:

"Who commands this detail, Sergeant Clutterbuck?"

"You do, of course, sir; but I only meant—"

"All right, sergeant! When I feel in actual need of your good advice I'll ask for it. Until then—save?"

The sergeant saluted, wheeled as on a pivot, then strode away in grim silence, while Major Piety moved on to the tent, inside of which he deposited the packet of money, for such the oilcloth-covered bundle actually was!

While preparations for supper were going on, Major Piety and his two guests took matters easily, the men chatting agreeably, and Daisy making an occasional remark to which the soldier listened as to an oracle.

Yet it was plain to be seen that the young woman felt in anything but high spirits, her smiles growing fewer and less brilliant, let Major Piety strive as he might to fetch them forth.

It was not until after the evening meal was dispatched, however, that actual allusion was made to this growing depression; and then the words came from the lips of her father, Amity Sell.

"Poor little chicken! You're clean worn out, Alice Daisy?"

She nestled closer to his side, giving a long sigh as that strong arm closed about her yielding figure; but then came the murmured words:

"No, Daddy! It's not—not just that! But—when I stop to think how those awful men tried to—murder you!"

"Oh, come, now, little girl! Don't think of such things, then! Why should you, pray? Here I am, right as right, and never a bit the worse for all their fanfaronade! And the money's all right, too, Daisy!"

"That money!" with a passionate gesture. "I wish—I almost wish the wide world didn't contain a dollar in either gold or silver! For, Daddy, I can't help the feeling, but I know—something warns me that still worse lies ahead of us, and all on account of that money!"

Daisy broke down, her sobs turning to tears, and all the major and father could say failed to assure the maiden that her fears and forebodings were entirely without foundation in fact.

Among other arguments used, Major Piety declared that he would be responsible for their safety as far as Fort Grant; and that, with her gracious permission, he would escort her still farther: past all peril of road agents, if not quite to their far-away home itself!

Daisy seemed calmed in a measure, now she had given vent to her supersti-

tious fears, and after a while she retired to the tent, which, Major Piety assured her, should be sacred to herself, and father that night.

Not until the young woman had passed away did Mr. Sell fairly unbosom himself to this newly found friend and guardian; but as time passed on, and they half reclined on the grass before the little campfire, their talk grew confidential and earnest.

Again Mr. Sell spoke of the modest little fortune he carried on his person, and to win which (almost beyond doubt) the robbers had made their daring swoop that day.

"How they got wind of it I can't even give a guess!" he added, soberly, as he sat staring into the fire. "I tried to keep it secret from all save Daisy; but—well, seems like these devils smell out money as a buzzard scents carrion!"

"And that's what I fancy, too," agreed Major Piety. "I've been expecting a brush with some of 'em—either Captain North or Captain South, as the head-devils call themselves—ever since heading for the fort."

"Then—but it's none of my business, of course!"

Major Piety coughed violently just then, for he saw Sergeant Clutterbuck gazing that way; and when the fit was fairly over, neither man seemed to remember the last words.

As the evening wore on, Mr. Sell showed symptoms of drowsiness, but when the major spoke of his retiring, he roused up, shaking his head vigorously, then saying:

"We're not going to turn you out entirely, major; don't you begin to think that way, now! There's room enough in the tent for three, so—"

"But Miss Sell might not like the idea, sir," hesitated Piety.

The words were still warm on his lips when Daisy emerged from the tent and spoke in a whisper to her parent; who gave a low chuckle as he turned to Major Piety to add:

"Miss Sell speaks for herself, major! She declines to appropriate your lodgings unless on one condition. And that is—"

"I would sleep more soundly if I knew I had two faithful guardians, sir," softly murmured the maiden, leaning upon her father's arm.

That settled it!

Quiet soon reigned over the little encampment.

Not a sound came from the tent, where slumber evidently had bound all three occupants, while all save the soldier on guard were sleeping without.

Hour after hour passed on without alarm or outcry, until the night was more than two-thirds spent and all save the drowsy sentinel seemed bound in death-like repose.

Then, making no more sound than shadow or spirit might have done, a single shape moved away from that little tent, pausing where a fair glimpse could be caught of the sentry, now leaning upon his carbine.

Barely long enough to make sure that no suspicion caused the halt, then creeping swiftly and noiselessly on to the nearest rocks, there taking advantage of the cover to progress still more rapidly.

Now safely beyond sight and earshot of the sleeping camp, the shadowy shape increased its pace, now running on velvet-shod feet, pausing only when another dark shape rose up directly in front, as though coming out of the earth itself!

Low whisperings, where no word was audible save to their own ears, then the brace of shadows separated, one falling back into greater darkness, the other swiftly yet cautiously retracing its steps until once more lying close at the tent rear.

The drowsy sentinel saw nothing, heard naught, but slowly paced his beat, never once suspecting what strange things were coming to pass that eventful night!

A faint sound came from inside the

tent, then its edge was raised far enough for that shadow to slip beneath, after which—silence!

Not for so very long, however.

A suspicious sound came to the ears of the soldier doing guard duty, and, rousing up as by instinct, he flung the muzzle of his carbine forward, sharply challenging on the crisp night air:

"Halt! Who comes there?"

As though the challenge was the signal for which all was waiting, pandemonium seemed to break loose on the instant.

Yells and screeches such as might have put a pack of hungry mountain lions to shame fairly rent the heavens, and then came the furious rush and clatter of iron-shod hoofs beating the stony soil.

The sentry pulled trigger, shooting at random, for the same instant something struck him in the middle, fairly lifting him off his feet and whirling him heavily into a patch of scrubby bushes!

At the same time Sergeant Clutterbuck and his men leaped to their feet, only to fall after the same queer fashion, while savage yells and hoots and curses added to the wild confusion.

At the first alarm Major Piety sprang erect, clasping to his bosom that packet of money, only to meet with the worst surprise of his life.

Steel-like fingers fastened upon that bundle of cash, tearing it away, while a thunderbolt seemed to fly up from the ground and strike him under the chin, knocking him up and backward, to fall in a blindly quivering heap against the rear of the tent, just as it was torn from its fastenings and leveled to earth by the same unseen force which so completely overthrew his armed escort.

CHAPTER III.

A DASH FOR DEAR LIFE.

The surprise was complete, the discomfiture perfect.

A furious dash, where scarcely a shadow was perceptible, and only crazy yells and shouts and mad trampling of hoofs told whither to look for the enemy; then—confusion worse confounded!

All of a heap the sergeant and privates were tumbled, swept off their footing by means which formed an enigma in itself, and ere they could rally even in a measure, the work was done and the dare-devil raiders were rushing off through the night, amid that reckless chorus, now wilder than ever, as it seemed to those sorely bewildered mortals.

Now it was that the superb force of discipline made itself manifest, for at the first stern call of their sergeant the boys in blue rallied to a common centre, drawing sidearms to replace the carbines lost in that mysterious upsetting.

At another command the squad surrounded the prostrate tent, ready to catch and capture on the instant, while Clutterbuck himself fastened upon the canvas, from beneath which now issued sundry muffled sounds.

A vigorous jerk and tremendous heave tore away the flattened tent, but no one attempted to flee, no person strove to rise erect, even then.

There lay the portly shape of Major Dix Piety, groaning, gasping for breath like one in his last agonies; but where were the others?

With something suspiciously like an oath, Sergeant Clutterbuck called out to his men:

"Steady, all! Don't let any person pass your lines until I can—on guard, every man-devil of ye, I say!"

He tore up a bunch of sun-cured grass growing near the tent, striking a match to touch the inflammable material, then flashing the ruddy torch over that confused scene.

Only Major Piety, now dizzily rallying his scattered wits. Nothing to be seen of either Amity Sell or his hysterical daughter, Miss Daisy!

"I knew it!" fairly exploded Sergeant

Clutterbuck, dropping the torch and shaking fingers as the flames licked their ends too keenly for comfort. "An infernal trap for—steady, major!"

"Who hit me? I'll never—gods! where's my—the money's gone!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck grasped the unsteady hand, which drew a revolver, but the effort was little better than mechanical, and Major Piety offered no sort of resistance, for just then an inkling of the stunning truth burst upon his dazed brain.

The package of bank notes: where was it?

"And those infernal bilks have gone with it!" fairly roared the sergeant, dropping the pistol relinquished by the stunned quartermaster. "Scatter, lads, and hunt for live meat! Shoot at sight, and shoot to kill!"

With each minute that passed the soldiers were growing more and more angry over their really ridiculous reverse, and willingly enough they sprang to execute these orders as far as might lie in their power.

Unfortunately there was little for them to work upon.

The enemy had vanished as abruptly as they came; one moment all was wild uproar and mad confusion, the next only mocking echoes lingered to tell what had been and now was not; then—silence!

Only one point was settled: that toward which the raiders had fled after sweeping the little encampment.

Nothing could be seen in that direction, however, and when torches were hastily improvised for the purpose of looking more closely for "sign," that stony, sterile soil kept its secrets well, and all Sergeant Clutterbuck could determine was just this: the raiders had broken ranks and scattered widely when only a few rods beyond the camp.

Calling to himself the soldier who had been on post when the attack was made, Clutterbuck turned back to the ruined camp, leaving the remainder of the escort searching for the broken trail.

A few curt questions put the sentinel in the presence of Major Piety, who seemed half stunned by the magnitude of his loss, proved sufficient to set the shrewd sergeant on the right scent, and after a brief examination of the ground on either side of the camp, he returned to make his report to the quartermaster.

"The enemy came at us in two squads, major, sweeping everything with one or more ropes stretched between them. An old trick, but—well, I'm sorry to say 'twas more than sufficient in this case!"

"I don't—the money's gone, Sergeant Clutterbuck! Sixty thousand dollars! And—it's gone, I say, sir!"

"And they're gone with the money, Major Piety—worse luck!" exploded the veteran, unable longer to choke back his ugly suspicions.

"What? You surely can't—are you gone crazy, sergeant?"

"Hardly so bad as all that comes to, Major Piety," with forced composure. "Surely you can begin to see it, sir? The man and woman: and she laughed in the two eyes of her when the name was called!"

"I don't—what do you mean?"

"All a sell, sir! Look at the name, even! Miss Alice Daisy Sell; or, 'A Daisy Sell!' And his: A-mity Sell! If the cash is gone, sir, right there's where and how and why it took to itself wings, sir!"

With unusual volubility spoke the thoroughly disgusted sergeant, and it was not until he had his say fairly out that Major Piety could interrupt that verbal flood.

Then his rage burst bonds, and the rough edge of his tongue was turned toward the veteran, who stood stiffly erect, listening, yet showing no greater emotion than might have done a graven image.

"You're crazy, sir—worse!" vowed the fat major, in conclusion. "You're insulting a lady who is too high—and she in peril of death, or far worse, at the hands of those merciless demons! Sto-

len away—abducted for—great heavens, sergeant! Why don't you—why don't you do something?"

"At your commands, Major Piety," stiffly replied the veteran, hand touching cap as he spoke. "Your orders, sir?"

"Get a hustle on! Find those devils who kidnapped—who robbed me of the money-box!"

"Very well, sir. I will see that the search is made, Major Piety."

Sergeant Clutterbuck was good as his word, and from that moment the hunt for their mysterious enemies was fairly begun.

Yet there was precious scant hope of success in any one of the party, even Major Piety being forced to recognize the improbability of overtaking those nimble-footed raiders after such a start, with the remainder of the night to add to the odds in their favor.

Still, the monetary loss he had suffered—sixty thousand dollars in greenbacks and national bank notes, with which his quarterly payments were to be made at Fort Grant and other posts—was far too heavy for even the ghost of a chance to be thrown away, and with feverish energy Major Piety urged on that almost hopeless quest through darkness to daylight, and still later.

As the gray dawn began to turn golden, the fat face of the quartermaster showed strangely worn and deep-lined, for more than the loss of his money-box was troubling his too-busy brain just now.

Although nothing further was said concerning his recent guests and their strange vanishment, Major Piety was brooding over both, those oddly chosen names ringing through his brain with fiendish persistency.

Was it all a cunning trick, as more than hinted by Sergeant Clutterbuck? Had he fallen victim to the wiles of another Delilah? Had she—oh, 'twas all an infernal lie!

Major Piety flung up a clenched hand at this, and he might have burst forth into savage speech, so intense was his emotion; but just then Sergeant Clutterbuck came to a halt in advance, giving signal of some important discovery just made.

Crouching a bit in the saddle, the sergeant stared eagerly over the rise ahead, seemingly watching an object or objects of far more than ordinary interest; but before the major could demand what was going on the soldier turned back, speaking rapidly as he drew nearer his superior officer:

"A chase going on over yonder, Major Piety!"

"One man riding ahead of a squad. May be part of our game, sir, or may not, but—"

Instead of listening further, Major Piety rode on to see for himself, drawing rein when just at the crest of that little divide.

Looking over and down, he sighted the chase, a couple of miles off, yet evidently coming nearer that point; as Sergeant Clutterbuck reported, a single horseman fleeing before a number of others.

"We can cut 'em off by dashing down this draw to the right, major," volunteered the sergeant, coming alongside. "The river'll keep him from veering off, even should he glimpse us before we got in front. And—I know that horse, by heavens, sir! 'Tis one of those claimed by Sell and—ready, lads! Follow me!"

Major Piety had no time to object against this usurping his prerogative, for the armed escort immediately took action, following close at the sergeant's heels as that worthy led the way down a side-draw, by means of which he calculated on cutting off yonder fugitive.

A reckless dash, where none save regular rough riders or special favorites of fortune could have kept from coming to grief almost at the outset; yet one and all, helter-skelter, pell-mell, tore down the hollow in crazy fashion, the good

steed ridden by the major gradually carrying its portly burden to the front.

The quartermaster was the first man to emerge from that draw upon comparatively level ground skirting yonder deep-bedded stream, and Major Piety gave a hoarse cry of blended rage, excitement, and surprise as he found himself only a few rods distant from yonder reckless fugitive.

For, despite sundry changes made in garb and headgear, he surely recognized his guest of the past night, Amity B. Sell!

"Halt!" fairly screamed the quartermaster, drawing a revolver as he spurred ahead the more surely to intercept that fugitive. "My money! My—the girl—stop, I say, or—"

The fugitive did stop, wrenching up his foam-flecked steed with an iron grip, which cast the creature fairly back upon its haunches for the moment; but that halt was purely mechanical, and very brief-lived.

"Scat, ye fat cat!" burst from his bearded lips as he twisted the head of his horse sharply to the left, taking action thus because of other foemen now coming out of yonder hollow.

"Halt, I say!" repeated Major Piety, lifting pistol hand as he gave warning. "I'll shoot you down unless you can—"

Another weapon flew up even more quickly, and its grim lips spoke in place of those of its reckless master.

"Eat dirt, you bag o' bad gas!" blended with the report of pistol, and with a sharp cry the gallant major went down with his animal, all in a heap, throwing the following squad into brief confusion as those struggling bodies barred the narrow way.

Sergeant Clutterbuck lifted his horse, clearing the dust-making mass at a bound, even as Major Piety again made his voice heard by his escort:

"Shoot him! Kill him if he don't—shoot, ye devils—shoot!"

With a wild, reckless laugh the mad rider dashed away, heading toward the high bank of the river, as though ignorant of its dangerous proximity, and thinking only of escape by superior speed or prowess as rough rider.

"Take him, dead or alive, men!" sternly ordered Sergeant Clutterbuck, as he pressed on in hot chase, unslinging his carbine as the words passed his lips. "In open rank—aim and fire at will!"

"Bah, ye devils in blue!" recklessly cried the fugitive, partly turning in saddle to swing hat with his free hand. "Ye may kill, but ye can't take! for—"

His words were drowned by a rattling volley from those carbines, and, struck by one of the bullets hat flew from his hand like a grotesque bird taking wing.

CHAPTER IV.

WHO HAS THE BOODLE?

As that shower of grooved lead whistled viciously around his ears, the reckless horseman ducked lower in saddle, his horse turning a bit more directly toward yonder high and precipitous bank, far below the edge of which flowed the dark green waters, broken here and there by bits and patches of foam.

"Too high! Aim lower—kill or cripple his horse!" harshly commanded the sergeant now in command, setting the example himself as well as he might over such rough racing.

Another irregular volley, and the death-doomed steed flung up its head with an almost human cry of agony, while the horseman himself seemed to feel the bitter bite of hungry lead at his vitals.

"Now—with a rush, men!" fairly screamed Sergeant Clutterbuck, all on fire as he saw victory drawing nigh. "Spread out and cut him off if he tries to—stop, ye blind devil!"

Well might he roar out in fierce amaze, for the fugitive wrenched his animal's head around until the river lay directly in their front, then forcing the falling

creature on to what seemed certain death to both man and beast!

"Shoot—drop 'em before—too late!"

Even as Clutterbuck cried out thus, the dying horse was forced to take the leap, its reckless rider giving one last yell of defiance as he vanished beyond that rocky bank, to plunge down to yonder swiftly flowing waters!

Hardly conscious of what they did, the escort drew rein, awed in spite of their natural hardihood by this seemingly suicidal action on the part of the fugitive.

Sergeant Clutterbuck was first to rally, and pressed forward to the high bank, leaping from saddle and letting his horse go free as he peered over and downward, carbine gripped with iron fingers, breath suspended while he looked for that living target for a final shot.

Up rose his weapon as he caught sight of a sluggishly moving, struggling mass in the disturbed waters; but he held his fire when he failed to see more than the body of the death-stricken horse.

Where was that reckless fellow the while?

Never more wholly alive than at that very instant, and seldom more nearly master of himself, body and brain, than just then!

It was with no thought of suicide that the daring leap for life was made, but he knew that along this course lay his one chance for cheating those merciless foemen; and, true to his reputation, Reckless Jack Haltern took the risky alternative.

Even while shooting downward over that high bank, freeing both feet from the stirrups to fall fairly clear of his mortally wounded horse, Haltern was looking around to improve his frail chances as much as possible with the brace of seconds left him for thought or planning.

A wonderfully brief space of time in which to shape a course of action, yet 'twas long enough for Reckless Jack to note one fact; and as he struck the water he dove, swimming strongly across the current in hopes of coming to the surface only when screened by yonder patch of driftwood hugging the further shore in a miniature eddy.

And there he lay in hiding, his face barely above the water, grinning maliciously at yonder boys in blue as they flocked to the bank, carbines in hand, looking for what they were fated not to find—just then or just there!

He chuckled grimly as he saw the tall sergeant bending far over the brink, gripping carbine at a ready while sweeping that foam-flecked surface the while.

"If those imps—Cap. North's boys for a million! If they'd just jump your backs, right now—what fun!" muttered Haltern, as he watched from his damp covert. "If they only would! But—dollars to doughnuts they've turned tail in a holy hurry when they smoked trouble ahead!"

A minute or two spent thus, then Haltern recognized the portly figure of Major Piety as that worthy came panting upon the scene, looking considerably worse for his tumble, yet very unlike a dead or dying mortal for all that.

"What comes next? Going to—a retreat, by glory!"

So it seemed, but then Haltern divined the real purpose of that sudden movement, for he saw Sergeant Clutterbuck motioning down the river and evidently speaking with no slight degree of earnestness.

"Going to look for my carcass at the shallows, below!" chucklingly observed the fugitive, reaching a hand backward to help himself to an easier position back of the drift. "Curse the mud! But better this mud than for my name to be—Dennis Mud!"

The lay of the ground above forced the soldiers to draw back from the brink, thus carrying them out of eye-range from below; but Jack Haltern had already seen quite sufficient to put him in touch with their plans, and he knew that unless something so far unforeseen

should turn up to hinder he might leave his far from comfortable covert after ten minutes or so without much fear of his daring ruse being detected.

"Even if they cross over they'll hardly leave horse to climb all the way down here," he mused, leaning back against the clay bank, lifting head and neck clear of the chilling element. "They'll monkey around my horse long enough to give me—ha!"

A faint sound came to his ears from the rocks lying above his covert, but before he could do more than softly ejaculate, a low, musical voice followed, with the words.

"Oh, come out of the wet, Jacky, boy!"

"Holy smoke! You, is it—Daisy?"

"Daisy, yes, but not dipped in dew; you take to that part of it, Jacky, darling!" with a soft, mocking laugh. "Will you slide out, old man?"

"What luck, captain?" asked Haltern, as he turned himself around in the patch of driftwood, preparatory to emerging from the river.

"Devil a bit! And you, Jack?"

"More off the same plug, worse luck!"

"Where the foul fiend can it have gone to, then?" in irritated tones which formed a strong and far from pleasant contrast to those used only a few seconds earlier.

"You tell, for I don't know how."

"Mind your eye, Jack! Don't leave a whole signboard for those infernal soldiers to study out! Keep to the rocks and strip your rags dry as you slide forth—so fashion!"

"You know it all, then?"

"I heard the racket, and saw the finish, yes. How came you to get so penned in, though?"

"More big luck, of course. Tell you later on when—ugh!" giving a groaning grunt and half-smothered curse as one knee came in violent contact with a sharp rock through a slip.

Emerging from his hiding place and leaving as few signs behind him as might well be, Jack Haltern crept along between the rocks, which afforded him fair shelter from prying eyes down the river, following close upon the heels of the person whom he had called "Daisy," although those same heels were unmistakably masculine now!

That cautious retreat did not last long, but it took the couple pretty well up that broken rise, where they crouched down in close companionship, eyes directed toward a lower reach of the river, where they could see Major Piety and his armed escort still watching and searching for the owner of yonder dead horse.

Jack Haltern gave a surly grumble as he flashed keen looks over such country as lay within his scope, then muttering:

"Run off, of course! If the blue-backs had only jumped them, 'stead o' wasting it all on me!"

"What do you mean, Jack?" asked his comrade—a young man, fair of hair, comely of face, with great blue eyes which just now held a glitter as of polished steel.

"Don't you know? I was jumped by a pack of curs; some of Captain North's hounds, or I'm 'way off my base! They ran me too close for comfort, but must have taken a hasty skip when the major's escort showed up in my front. Anyway—"

"North's men?" echoed the younger renegade, face glowing with an expression hardly agreeable to an honest eye. "Do you think—could they have swiped the boodle, Jack?"

"Ask me an easy one, Cap!"

"But some one must have swiped it, man!"

"Unless your horse kicked it off while on the stampede. That might have been the way of it, after all, boss!"

"Yes, but—didn't we look, in vain?"

"While it was too dark for much better'n feeling, though," reminded Haltern. "I thought of that and was going back for a more thorough hunt when

those imps jumped me so red-hot. I say, Cap!"

"Say it then, confound you, Jack!"

"Isn't it pretty nigh time for us to close accounts with that outfit? Cap. North's been doing us dirt ever since—"

"Just as Captain South's been serving him, remember."

"I know, but I'd hate to rack out o' this section without first setting down on that outfit, boss; I would, honest!"

"Curse them! If I only had the boodle safe! To think! Played it slick as grease on the fat old ass, got fairly clear with the money-box, only to lose it like that! Fire and furies! 'Tis enough to make a man go kick his own fool brains out with a mule!"

"What d'ye reckon startled the horses so badly?"

"And who started the fire we crept ahead to investigate, why don't you ask?" almost viciously added the younger man.

Take it all-in-all the enigma was complete.

As father and daughter these daring schemers had played a doubly audacious game against long odds, succeeding almost beyond their dearest hopes from the outset, only to meet with disaster when they felt that all peril was forever past.

Leaving their allies to scatter and make their way to a rendezvous as best they might, these two principals kept closely together, picking their way leisurely through the night until startled by glimpsing a small glow not many rods ahead and to one side of their course.

Naturally suspicious, they feared to pass on and risk pursuit by some cunning foe; so they dismounted, tying their horses, one of which bore the money-box secured to its pommel, then crept on to investigate.

Just when they drew close enough to make out a deserted campfire, an alarm came from the quarter where they had left their horses, followed by a stampede.

Chase was given, and both animals were recovered several miles away from that spot; but the package of money was missing!

In vain they searched for man or money, and the puzzle still remained unsolved: who had the boodle?

From their covert the two chums saw the soldiers give over their fruitless search at the shallows below, then mount and ride slowly away from the scene of their latest discomfiture, evidently believing the daring rider had shared the fate of his poor horse.

When fairly certain that the enemy was gone, Jack Haltern and his companion crossed the river, hurrying over to where still lay the horse recently ridden by Major Dix Piety, left just as it had dropped before the unerring aim of the road-raider, Reckless Jack.

The carcass was searched, but without finding the lost money-box, and, feeling fairly certain that it had not been recovered by its rightful owner, the two renegades interchanged looks.

"Which way now, Captain South?" asked Haltern, soberly, awed in no slight degree by that unusually stern, even fierce, expression.

"To find that boodle, of course!" with savage emphasis. "I'll stick it out on that line now if I die for it!"

"All right, boss, if you say so," gloomily. "But there's bad luck coming! We fooled 'em once; next time we'll get heap sight worse!"

CHAPTER V.

HELD UP!

With never a thought of snags ahead or peril impending, Billy Brown was sleepily tooling his "hearse" along the alkali-whitened road reaching from Boomerang to Nicodemus, now "nid-nid-nodding" on the box, then rousing up sufficiently far to tighten reins a bit as a more than ordinarily "nasty" bit of road was reached.

Within and without the battered old stage reigned a sluggish half-somnolence, for even the most sprightly passenger had long since felt the drowsy, wearisome wear-and-tear of that journey.

But livelier times were in store, and they broke with a sternly harsh shout, followed by the grim challenge:

"Hand up, all! Give a kick and it'll prove your last one!"

"Glorious Ge-mighty!" fairly howled Billy, as he kicked over the brake-beam, throwing his weight upon the crutch, at the same time leaning heavily back on the ribbons in his calloused hands.

"Crack-crack!"

Two shots in swift succession, the bullets from which tore zip-zip through the stage just above the heads of the startled "insides," causing even the boldest of that trio to duck head in ludicrous dismay.

"Kick or squeal and 'twill be your last!" harshly warned the obstacle in the way, now striding forth from his snug cover, smoking pistols showing first, held at a level and all ready to add death-knell to warning shot.

"Don't—don't blizzer, boss!" fairly spluttered the driver, trying to lift an elbow high enough to guard his own precious head the while.

"Play clean white, or I'll turn it into a hearse for keeps. Steady, all. I'm mild as new cider when all goes smooth, but let once—hold 'em dead level, mates!"

"You bet ye, Cap!"

"Level goes—from start to finish!"

The ambushade was fairly alive with armed foemen, it seemed, and, if not entirely surrounded by outlaws, the stage was so near that ugly condition as to leave no room for amusement, to speak mildly.

"Keerful, boss!" ventured Billy Brown, though 'twas in fear and trembling that he offered the protest. "Thar's a leddy inside, an'—"

"Button up, will you?" harshly cried the leading outlaw, turning one ugly muzzle that way and sending a bullet fairly through the limp brim of the driver's hat. "Next call salivates you for keeps, Billy B!"

"Oh, good—Lawd!"

"You critters inside the hearse!" added the robber, his voice seeming harsher yet as it came from back of that eye-letted mask of sable stuff. "The same to you, only more of it! Try to kick even a weenty bit and down ye go—so full of lead you'll pan out rich as a mineral claim!"

"Don't shoot!" came a voice from within the held-up stage. "We're not fighting, for there's a lady with us."

"That's all right, too," assured the black-avised master of ceremonies, moving closer to the stage door on that side. "Climb out o' that hearse, one by one, and show your empty hands ahead of your faces, without ye want to kick in dead earnest! Now, show up!"

Even while he was speaking, an unseen hand was fumbling with the fastenings of that door; then the barrier swung wide, and a pair of sun-bronzed hands showed through the opening, while a deep-toned voice made itself heard:

"Hyar I come, boss, mild as new milk an'—"

"Oh, hold your hush, or I'll pierce your thick lips for a skewer!"

"You say it, boss, an' I hain't a-kick-in' even a weenty!" meekly added the grizzled owner of those brown and hairy paws, following after—a typical miner "on the prospect."

"Line up and hold your hush, there! Come, the rest of you! Come in due shape or fare the worse! Hands first and empty, or chew cold lead!"

A tall, gaunt figure in dusty gray clothes followed after the prospector, giving but a single glance toward those menacing shapes, then turning toward the opening through which he had just passed, as though to lend another aid and support.

"Steady, all! No tricks on travelers,

there, or I'll riddle ye worse than a gravel-sifter!" warned the raider chief, seeming to scent mischief underlying that deliberate movement.

"My daughter, sir," coldly said the man in gray, flashing a half-defiant glance over shoulder as he assisted a veiled figure to alight from the stage. "Have courage, Rosa, dear! No one shall harm you while I can—careful, little one!"

The young lady's foot slipped, but she recovered her balance, with a little forced laugh, then clung the closer to her companion's arm while her great eyes flashed over the scene with half-terror, half-amusement.

"Line up, there!" and the chief of the hold-up motioned with revolver muzzle as he spoke. "Hold 'em level, lads, while I look after the rest. And you—pile out o' that hearse, I tell ye!"

"If there's ary more, they're ghosts, boss," ventured the driver from his elevated perch, keeping his team well in hand, with foot on the brake-lever. "Jest the three of 'em, or I wouldn't—"

"You lie, Billy Brown!"

"An' I never knowed it, nuther!" resignedly muttered the knight of silk and ribbons, fairly collapsing as the menacing muzzle swung his way once more.

Having thus effectually "corked up" the driver, the road-agent turned a keen look toward the three passengers who alone had emerged from the stage.

Neither one of that trio appeared to be the individual for whom he was looking, and, with an execration grating through his clenched teeth, the outlaw sprung swiftly forward, revolver first, alighting close beside the stage to sweep that interior with his glowing eyes.

A brief recoil as of amazement, then he pressed yet closer, thrusting head and shoulders inside, bending low enough to look beneath those dingy, worn seats, but discovered nothing of interest, and, whirling around once more, he confronted the trio of passengers, demanding:

"Which is which? Where's Major Piety?"

No answer, though the prospector looked curiously toward his fellow-passenger, thus giving the road-raider sufficient clew, as he thought.

"Why don't you speak up, curse ye?" he demanded, pistol covering the gentleman in gray, drawing a low, frightened cry from the young lady, who hung tremblingly upon his left arm.

"You asked for one Major Piety, sir, while I am—"

"Lying can't begin to save ye!"

"While my name is Watkins, Webb Watkins, sir," steadily continued the man in gray. "This lady is my daughter, and we are bound for Nicodemus, where I—I have a trifle of business to look after."

The slightest possible hesitation before the ending, yet 'twas long enough to confirm the suspicions evidently held by this masked robber.

"The lie sticks in your thrapple, eh?" he broke in with, laughing harshly a bit later. "Well, Major Piety—"

"I am not Major Piety, sir!"

"The soldier sticks out all over ye, sure enough! Maybe you'll deny that you've ever served Uncle Sam, major?"

"I have served, sir, but only as a volunteer, during the civil war. I am still termed colonel, through courtesy, sir, but, of course—"

"Augh!" as his revolver moved closer to that gravely dignified face. "Talk less and do more, major! Whar's the boodle, now?"

"I don't—"

"Oh, give him the money, papa!" tremblingly implored the young lady, shrinking away from that menacing muzzle, yet still clinging to the arm of her guardian. "I'm afraid!"

"It's fork over or take a tumble for the boneyard, major!"

"If I was alone, sir, you should kill me first," sternly retorted Colonel Wat-

kins, pale as a corpse, but certainly showing no personal fear as he stood unshrinkingly before that menacing weapon. "As it is—"

"Cut it short, major! Time's mighty precious. Where's the boodle, you old donkey?"

A hot flush came into that thin face, but while that helpless one clung tremblingly to his side Colonel Watkins realized that actual resistance on his part would be worse than a crime.

With his free hand he drew a fairly plump wallet from an inner pocket, letting it fall before the road-raider as he spoke:

"If I was alone, sir, you'd have to take it—if you could!"

Instead of snatching greedily at the pocketbook, the road-raider gave it a contemptuous kick before crying out in still harsher tones:

"I'll take heap-sight more than that, you slippery devil! Unless—where's the boodle, I tell you?"

"You have every dollar I brought with me, sir, and may it blister your fingers like—"

With lightning swiftness the revolver moved, to cut those gray-mustached lips with a vicious stroke.

"Try to foolish me, will ye?" snarled the enraged ruffian, bringing gun to a level, the black bore staring Colonel Watkins fair between the eyes. "Where's the heap o' money you're trying to smuggle through to Fort Grant, Major Dix Piety?"

Miss Watkins gave a shivering cry of terror, but her father with gentle force removed her clinging arms from his erect person, pushing the loved one partially behind his body as he spoke again:

"You're on the wrong scent, sir, if you take me to be the officer you name. I am not—"

"You lie like a cur!" viciously snarled the road-raider, seemingly beside himself with rage and disappointment. "Don't I know? Haven't I a copy of the way-bill as made out by—I say, driver!"

"On deck, boss!"

"You'd ought to know what you're totting, anyway, Billy," with something like moderation coming into his tones once more. "How does your way-bill run, then? Isn't it Major Dix Piety and—eh?"

"Yes, but—waal, boss, I reckon thar must 'a' bin some sort o' mistake or hitch 'bout that 'ar," slowly and reluctantly answered the man on the box.

"It'll prove a mighty sore mistake for you-all, then! If this isn't Paymaster Piety, of Fort Grant, then whar is the major and his big boodle?"

"He never showed up, fer a honest fact, boss," earnestly assured the driver, yet flinching visibly from those angrily glowing orbs. "This gent hain't him, aryhaw; fer Piety—he's fat and pudgy-like, an'—"

"It's a lie—all an infernal lie to cheat me out of my rich haul!" savagely cried the masked road-agent, whirling once more upon the colonel, thrusting pistol fairly into his face as he added: "Cough it up, curse ye! Fork over or off comes your roof, Piety!"

Until now Miss Watkins had shrunk away in fear and trembling, but as she saw how savagely her father was menaced native courage rose to the surface, and, with a little cry of indignation, she sprung to the front in defense of her loved one.

"You wicked villain! He isn't—my father never—"

Her little gloved hand passionately struck that leveled weapon to one side, seemingly just in time to save Colonel Watkins from death, for just then the revolver exploded, either through shock or pressure of finger.

"You devil!" fiercely cried the colonel, fearing far more for his now shrieking child than for his own life. "I'll kill you if—"

Instantly all was confusion, for the outlaw struck savagely at his assailant, then the next instant the two powerful

men fell to earth in stern grapple, while the other robbers shouted and swore and pranced around like wild men, for the moment thrown completely off-guard.

"Oh, father—father!" wailed the terrified maiden.

CHAPTER VI.

FOOT-HILL FRANK, THE FANCY SPORT.

"Mischief brewing, else I'm no judge!"

These muttered words came from lips of a man who was crouching high up among the rocks which overlooked the stage trail from Boomerang to Nicodemus, and were drawn forth by something which caught his keen gaze, over the rocks and far away!

"Men and horses! The glint of sunlight on gun or pistol! Lying in ambush alongside the trail! What does all that spell, anyway?"

Those keen eyes swept still further toward the east, there to once more settle upon a tiny, dim, barely perceptible cloud of gray dust which Foot-Hill Frank right well knew marked the present location of the regular stage covering those long and difficult miles lying between the two flourishing mining towns just set down.

"Put two and two together, add up and—how much?" again muttered the young athlete, gaze coming back to yonder closer shapes. "Easy to say, surely! A hold-up by either Captain North or Captain South! And here goes to find out which one is which, if it lays in the wood!"

With a last swift glance over the scene spread beyond, as though to more perfectly fix the lay of ground in his mind, then the young man drew back until his further movements could have the shelter of rocks and bushes, such as could find a precarious rooting there in that desolate waste.

"Looks like the gang meant sure work, for a fact! Nearer a round dozen than half that number, all armed to the teeth and ready to slay as quick as rob, I reckon, too!" grimly murmured the Sport, as he picked his way through the rocks, lessening the distance between himself and yonder ambushade, seemingly without a thought as to his own peril.

No man living was more thoroughly acquainted with that stretch of country than Frank Fitch, better known, perhaps, as "Foot-Hill Frank," or the "Fancy Sport."

And no mortal man could have made much better time passing over the ground than this same Sport, either, urged on as he was by more than a vague fancy for witnessing a hold-up such as he felt certain was in contemplation right now.

A belt of weapons encircled his trim waist, leaving both hands free to aid his legs in surmounting the many difficulties which lay in the path he was compelled to take just then.

Swift and sure in every movement, Foot-Hill Frank rapidly drew nearer the scene of action, yet with all his speed the natural difficulties proved to be so great that he began to fear he would be all too late to either warn the stage-driver, or to take part in the hold-up after his own sweet fancy.

"Take your time, Billy, boy!" he muttered, breath coming quick and strong, yet his nerves remaining steady as ever in spite of the tremendous exertions he felt obliged to put forth in the unequal race. "If you knew all I can guess at, even! You wouldn't—take your time, I say, Billy, darling!"

As few men could have done, Foot-Hill Frank won his way until only a few more rods lay between himself and the stage road at the point chosen for the hold-up; but that brief stretch of ground proved more difficult to cross than all the rest had been!

As he paused to hearken, Foot-Hill Frank could just catch the faint rumble of wheels and steady fall of iron-shod hoofs, his brows gathering in a dark

frown as he saw how helpless he was to entirely foil the road-raiders. Unless—should he shoot a blind warning?

"No sort of use!" he decided, just as swiftly as came the thought. "If they heard my gun at all, 'twould send 'em ahead on the run, and that would make a bad matter worse in the end. North or South, yonder head devil wouldn't stop at slinging cold lead like drops of water out of a sprinkling-pot! So—legs, do your duty!"

That pause was very brief, barely long enough to catch a single full breath, yet Foot-Hill Frank clenched his teeth more tightly as he again sprung forward; for just then a couple of shots rung out from the other side of that rocky elevation, and he knew that the trap was fairly sprung by the road-raiders.

"The band begins to play, and here I am—far from a reserved seat in the bald-head row! Git thar, Frank!"

Easily said, but far less easy to accomplish; yet never mortal man worked harder to get into trouble than this, the Fancy Sport!

Clinging to rocks, drawing himself up and over them by steel-like muscles, then recklessly leaping across ugly cracks and crevices, only to go through with it all, time and time again.

Still, each passing minute carried Foot-Hill Frank a bit nearer the scene of action, and as no other shots had succeeded those initiatory explosions, he felt fairly assured that no particular harm was being done to stage or pilgrims as yet.

"If I can't do better, what's the matter with a cool squint at the head-center?" the Fancy Sport asked himself while winning his way over and through those rocks. "Maybe he'll show up clearer to an outsider, and if I can only make out which is which, Captain North or Captain South, big man or little demon, why—ha!"

The mountaineer saw his goal only a few feet ahead of him, but just then a sudden outcry came from the stage road on the lower level, followed by a sharp explosion which was past mistaking.

"Nasty work or I'm a liar from 'Way-back!" cried the Sport, rushing ahead as fast as lay in his power, right hand dropping to revolver-butt as he won his first glimpse of the thrilling scene below.

Just in time to see Colonel Watkins and the road-raider chief fall in what might easily prove to be a death-grapple; to see Rosamond Watkins stagger dizzily back, shrieking aloud in dauntlessly apprehension; to behold at least half a dozen armed ruffians excitedly breaking cover as though to lend their captain aid and assistance.

All this at a single glance, then the reckless Sport took action, effective as it was prompt.

He sent a couple of shots into the midst of the startled road-raiders, at the same time letting forth an ear-rending cheer, followed by the words as he himself sprung over those thick-lying rocks:

"Now we have got 'em, lads! Close in—don't let a single devil get away alive! Close in—and shoot to kill!"

Noise enough for half a score lusty throats, surely!

And every time his feet struck the rocks that yelling, cheering whooping shape seemed to emit a shot or two, lead screeching viciously as the aimless bullets glanced from stone or rock below.

As luck would have it, the chief road-agent was whirled over in the fall, his head striking heavily against the flinty ground, partially stunning the fellow, and permitting Colonel Watkins to scramble to his feet, thinking solely of guarding his idolized daughter from worse usage at those lawless hands.

At the same moment the reckless attack from high up those rocks overhanging the trail threw the rallying robbers into still greater confusion, and,

knocking back a couple of those nearest, Colonel Watkins grasped Rosamond about the waist, bearing her toward the stage, into which he first thrust the maiden, then turned at bay.

"Inside, pardner!" fairly howled the honest prospector, swift to catch the chance of saving his hard earnings. "Inside an'—whip 'em up, Billy, ye devil!"

And, almost before those rusty-looking boots could draw inside the stage, Brown kicked back the brake-beam, slackened ribbons and plied silk furiously, sending his team ahead at full run!

All this took place with dizzying rapidity, and the stage was under full headway before Foot-Hill Frank fairly realized what was coming.

He yelled and shouted all the louder, cheering on his imaginary army, shooting as he could at each break-neck stoppage, all the time coming toward the level where the utterly demoralized road-raiders were now in full flight.

He saw them plunge into that fringe of bushes, to leap upon their horses and flee like crazed curs, with the half-stunned chief very near the front of the flight, too!

But not all went who had broken ambush, as Foot-Hill Frank saw when his feet finally struck the road level. One of the random shots had found a billet, and over that prostrate shape the Fancy Sport bent for a brief space.

"You, is it?" he muttered, grimly, as he tore away that rude mask of black calico. "Sorry for you, old man, but—well, 'twas your own choice of making a living, and if you—steady, boy!"

From the leafy covert just then came a single horse, trail-rope flying as it parted under the strain; but ere the frightened creature could fairly get under headway Foot-Hill Frank was at its head, gripping the broken rope with steel-like fingers.

An active leap carried him into the saddle, and, using the trail-rope as lash to quicken those flying legs, the Sport dashed off in hot chase of the now unsighted stage.

"Dollars to cents the dogs'll rally in time to try it again at the Bend!" formed a portion of the daring Sport's thoughts as he rushed swiftly along the trail, drawing rein for a brief space when he reached the crest of that gentle divide.

He flashed a keen glance across to the left, giving a grating mutter as he caught sight of a little dust-cloud in that direction.

"I just knew it! If Billy Brown had the wit of a louse, he'd suspect as much, too! As it is—git thar, hoss! You've got to git thar, if only for the petticoat's sake!"

Fortunately Foot-Hill Frank had captured a good and swift animal, and, sparing him not, only a minute or two more were required to carry him out upon the more level ground, where he again sighted the stage, still going at reckless speed, heading as directly as possible for Nicodemus, Billy Brown never sparing the silk in his terror.

Yet Foot-Hill Frank rapidly gained upon the cumbrous vehicle, and he was shouting for Billy to put on the brakes, when a head showed at one of the door-windows, then a bullet whistled back from out that little cloud of smoke, coming so close to Frank's ear that he jerked head aside as though he actually felt the bullet's sharp bite!

CHAPTER VII.

FOOLING THE RAIDERS.

"Steady, there, you moon-eyed idiot!" sharply cried Foot-Hill Frank, naturally indignant at such a hot reception while taking so much risk and trouble to serve these pilgrims. "Can't you see—"

Sight surely was not lacking, since another shot was sped from yonder unsteady window, and once again the Fancy Sport

caught the nasty hum of grooved lead as the missile sped by, harmless indeed, yet coming too near for mere amusement.

Swinging himself lower in saddle and to one side, thus in goodly measure making a living shield of his confiscated mount, Fitch urged the horse on at renewed speed, veering to his left in such a manner as to foil another shot from that opening in the side of the coach.

At the same time he called aloud his name and mission, bidding the half-frantic driver pull up lest he run headlong into another and still more dangerous ambushade.

Gaining rapidly upon the swaying, swinging, rattling old vehicle, Foot-Hill Frank saw Billy Brown looking back, beard on shoulder, and to hasten recognition he jerked off his hat, laying head and face open to inspection, at the same time shouting impatiently:

"Down brakes, Fool Billy! Can't you see! I'm Frank Fitch, and—oh, take a tumble, you John-donkey!"

Another wild stare, then the driver dropped whip to throw weight upon brake-crutch and ribbons, casting his double span into wild confusion and most assuredly stirring up the "insides" after anything but an agreeable fashion.

"Don't shoot!" he spluttered. "It's a fri'nd! 'Tain't them pesky road-agents fer—glory-to-amen—Foot-Hill!"

"Hold on, there!" sharply supplemented the Fancy Sport as he caught another glimpse of a menacing muzzle coming out at window, evidently on mischief bent. "Can't you recognize a friend when you need one as badly—you, is it, Gingerly?"

"Holy ghost o' Israel!" fairly exploded the hero of that revolver, for the first time seeming to recognize the horseman. "Ef I didn't think you was them which—Foot-Hill Frank, or I'm played dirt by the two eyes o' me!"

"That's all right, but drop that gun, you chunk of quicksilver! Think I've taken all this risk and trouble to be made a sifter of?"

"I never—waal, now, I *will* be double-dog-goned!"

"You'd surely ought to kick yourself like—beg pardon, ma'am!"

Foot-Hill Frank cut himself short as a more than fair face showed itself just over one of those dusty shoulders, and, tipping his hat, the Fancy Sport smiled in place of frowning.

Just that one glance, then Colonel Watkins drew his daughter back, taking her place, with stern curiosity visible in every feature.

"What is the matter, sir? Why have you been chasing us like—"

"To save you from running into a still worse ambushade, sir," curtly cut in the adventurer, swinging himself out of saddle, but still holding fast to that broken trail-rope as he drew closer to that window. "You broke through the road-raiders, back yonder, but they've taken a short cut to strike Goose Neck ahead of you, where—"

"Glory to Ephra-ham!" once more exploded excitable Billy Brown, as he divined all that those words covered. "An' I never so much as tuck a weenty thunk that-a-way! An' them—we're done gone, an' that's gospel fact, with devil a lie—nyther!"

"Not if you'll trust me," quickly added the Fancy Sport, his interest in the affair by no means lessened since catching that glimpse of Rosamond's fair face.

"You mean—what do you mean, sir?" asked the colonel, sharply.

"Business—that's what!" volunteered Gingerly, swinging wide the door to spring out of the coach. "Fools we, not to smoke the trick to our own selves, but now—I'm gwine to hoof it—I be!"

"Steady, Alf!" checked the Sport, hand on arm, while adding: "You're not a runaway, old man, particularly where there's a lady to take thought for.

Wait a bit until—climb off your perch, Billy Brown."

"Ef they hain't time to make a run through the Neck—"

"You know there's not time for that, Billy, or would know it if you hadn't joggled your thick wits all in a muddle," half contemptuously interrupted the Sport.

"We kin turn 'round, cain't we, though?"

"And get run into long before you could hit the half-way slope! I begin to fear you're afraid, Billy Brown!"

"Wall, boss, you hain't nigh so feared o' that same as I be my own self!" bluntly acknowledged the driver, with a sickly grin wrinkling his weather-beaten visage, briefly. "I'm paid fer drivin', not fer fightin'. See?"

But Fancy Frank was paying him no further heed just then, turning instead to the stage, in the door of which hesitated Colonel Watkins.

"To boil it all down, sir, it's pretty much like this," hastily explained the Sport, feeling the value of minutes in such a crisis. "You shook off the road-agents, back yonder—"

"Thanks to your opportune coming, I believe? Am I not right, sir?"

"Never mind that just now, please!" impatiently. "If the fellows let you slip then, they're trying mighty hard to make up for it now, and it'll take prompt action to foolish the gang, you understand?"

"You mean, sir?"

"That they took a cross-cut, and are now fairly ahead of you on the road between this and Nicodemus," assured the Fancy Sport.

"An' if they jump us at Goose Neck, it's good-by all!" vigorously asserted Alfred Gingerly, the prospector.

"That's no lie, either," assented the Sport, before adding: "There's only one choice left you as I see—to abandon the stage and cut 'cross-lots for town, or else turn squarely around and make for Boomerang, if good luck will let you get there!"

"Which course would you advise, sir?" asked the colonel.

"To strike for Nicodemus, leaving the hearse and taking the horses along," instantly answered Foot-Hill Frank. "There's a mount for each one, including Billy Brown, and I can guide you by a route practicable enough, though hardly fitted for a horse-race."

"If we are pursued?"

"That's hardly probable, sir. We'll get such a start before yonder knaves can smoke the trick that even they'll be too wise to make any attempt to head us off again," confidently declared Fitch.

"Which shall it be, then? I'll guarantee you a free run if you care to take my advice. If not—well, of course, I'll see it out, but with a lady along I'd hardly elect to fight a passage, you understand?"

"Nuther will I, nur yit my critters!" positively declared Billy Brown, now on the ground and already unhooking the traces. "Them blame' imps'd turn us all into sifters, fust clatter! So-ho, boy! Kick not, lest ye git kicked fer pay, I'm tellin' ye, Dandy!"

Even now the doughty colonel of volunteers seemed to hang in the wind, but a hasty whisper from the red lips of his daughter turned the scale, and, with a long breath, he declared his readiness to accept the advice and guidance of this dashing stranger.

"Good enough! Help Billy unhook, Gingerly, while I—any valuables in boot or box, Brown?"

"Nothin' better'n the mail-bag, boss. No 'xpress, by good luck!"

The four horses were quickly prepared for the change of work ahead of them, their harness being stripped off and cast inside the coach, leaving only their bridles in place.

While the others were doing this, Foot-Hill Frank was making some slight changes in the furniture of the horse so

recently owned by a road-raider, and now lifted hat, smiling brightly as he spoke directly to the young lady passenger.

"I reckon you can manage it now, ma'am. Of course, it isn't a regular side-saddle, but—"

"Thanks!" with a slight blush, as she dropped her father's hand to step forward. "I have tried the same plan—when visiting the farm. I can manage very well, thank you."

"Allow me to—thanks!"

With a quick, steady movement Foot-Hill Frank assisted the young lady into saddle, guiding her daintily-shod foot into the turned stirrup before drawing back to give place to her father.

By this time the stage horses were in readiness, and, each man taking a mount, the little cavalcade left the road under lead of the Fancy Sport.

After a minute or two of slow and risky picking their way, the rocks scattered further apart, making progress easier and more rapid.

Up to this moment all had followed their guide without remark or question, but now Colonel Watkins pushed closer to Fitch, asking:

"Who is Major Dix Piety, anyway?"

Foot-Hill Frank gave a start and a low, prolonged whistle as he turned face toward the questioner, then exclaiming:

"Oh-ho! Is that the way of it, then?"

"Well, the fellow who seemed to take lead in that hold-up insisted on calling me by that name and title; and so—eh?"

"He did, eh? Well, then, it's just possible that we may have more trouble, after all. If Major Piety was—"

"Who and what is he, sir?"

"Quartermaster, who handles big money in connection with Fort Grant, and other frontier posts within his—Major Piety, eh?"

As though rendered uneasy by this unlooked for complication, Fitch pressed ahead more rapidly, taking advantage of every bit of open ground and possible short-cut, like one who feared a chase, even with such a start in their favor.

It was not until more than a mile had been placed behind them, and he could look back to far-away Goose Neck, as yonder wide curve in the stage-road was locally termed, that the Sport seemed to draw another clear breath.

One look, then he broke into a short laugh, following it with:

"Look, please! Yonder are the varlets, just beginning to smoke our little trick! Kicking themselves for not divining the dodge, too, or I'm 'way off in my guess!"

Guided by that pointing finger, one and all could see how narrowly they had escaped another encounter with the road-raiders; for yonder, not more than a couple of miles ahead of the point where now lay the abandoned stage, were visible a number of horsemen, seemingly in fierce excitement, as if they also were using eyes to some purpose.

"That's what we natives call Goose Neck," explained Foot-Hill Frank, all show of doubt or uneasiness banished now. "If you'd kept straight ahead—well, never mind that now!"

"We owe it to you, sir, that we are here instead of yonder," gravely spoke up Colonel Watkins; but if Fitch saw that extended hand, he paid no notice, for he was once more in motion.

"If it wasn't for Major Piety I wouldn't worry about that outfit," he asserted, as he moved ahead toward Nicodemus. "If they were really after his hoodle—well, we'll take no off-chances this time!"

For several minutes more the little party pressed on through those nearly trackless wilds, trusting wholly to their dashing guide, who had served them such a good turn already.

Nothing happened to disturb their hopes of safety for that length of time; then, throwing up a hand in swift

warning, Foot-Hill Frank drew rein, fetching all to an abrupt halt.

"Hist! Sounds like somebody ahead, or I'm an angel!"

That brief, breathless pause, then every ear there caught the unmistakable clink of metal against stone, warning them that horses, if not horsemen, were not far away and directly in their course!

Rosamond gave a faint cry, and the colonel pushed his horse far enough ahead to grip Foot-Hill Frank by an arm, his other hand shoving the cold muzzle of a revolver against the guide's face, as he whispered:

"Careful, you! If this means treachery, I'll blow your brains out!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MAJOR PIETY ON THE TRAIL.

A tragedy might easily have followed that stern threat had one less cool-brained and steady-nerved been acting as guide.

Instead of either flinching from the weapon, which fairly touched his face, or trying to knock the pistol aside, Foot-Hill Frank never altered a muscle for the moment, looking steadily into those fiercely glowing eyes as he evenly spoke:

"Don't play the fool, sir. If I'm acting as a decoy-duck, as you seem to suspect—"

"I'll kill you like a mad wolf, sir!"

"I would be too late to save yourself or party, sir," averred the Fancy Sport. "If I'm what I claim to be, a friend, your shooting me would merely help the enemy at your own expense. Either way your lead would be wasted, Colonel Watkins!"

Acting on impulse, Rosamond pushed her horse closer the two men, at the same time speaking in low but earnest tones:

"Don't, father! He's a true man! His face is honest, and I feel sure he is a friend, not an enemy!"

Fitch looked his thanks into that lovely face, but there was no time for giving more open expression to his grateful sentiments.

The sound of hoofstrokes grew clearer, and, as he recognized the fact, Colonel Watkins slackened his grip, drawing back a bit, though still holding his revolver in readiness for swift and effective use in case the worst of his suspicions should be realized.

But the adventure was not to end thus, for just then a sharp and peremptory challenge came from the front.

"Who comes? Talk quick, or—halt!"

"Friends—don't shoot!" swiftly called back Foot-Hill Frank, as though he recognized the voice; but all doubts were banished an instant later, for a horseman in army blue forged around yonder high rock, carbine held at a ready, his grizzled mustaches bristling in warlike fashion.

"Who and what are you, there?" demanded the sergeant, thus identified by the chevrons upon his sleeve.

"Friends, and honest people; no less," quickly responded the guide. "If you're really spoiling for a fight, though, sergeant, why not tackle the road-agents over yonder?"

For the first time the veteran looked at one, not at all, and then the lines of his stern visage perceptibly softened as recognition came to the rescue.

"What! You is it, Fitch?" he exclaimed, carbine dropping to a more peaceful position, even as other horses crowded around that barring boulder.

"What's left of me, Clutterbuck," was the half-laughing reply. "If you would do me the favor of an introduction to—Major Piety!"

This was hardly what Foot-Hill Frank intended to say, but just then a portly shape showed itself close to the sergeant's rear, and the name issued in a surprised ejaculation.

An expression of disappointment marked that fat, flushed face, for the

quartermaster vaguely hoped to learn something of his missing money-box, even if it was not actually recovered right then and there.

Then, as his fat-encircled eyes rested upon that shapely figure and charming face, another swift alteration came, and, pushing past his escort, Major Piety doffed hat in a gallant bow, completely ignoring the lesser units of that little assembly for the time being.

"Major Piety, Colonel Watkins and daughter," curtly uttered Fitch, by way of an informal introduction, then turning aside with Sergeant Clutterbuck, who asked in lowered tones:

"What did you mean by saying, a bit ago, Fitch?"

"Just that, no less," in the same tones. "These good people were held up by road-agents—"

"What? Not Captain South?"

"Captain North, unless the little demon has shot up to measure with the big devil," promptly replied the Fancy Sport. "But, either way, you ought to have some rare fun if you could only strike the gang fairly."

"Show us how, and see how mighty quick the joining will be!"

"And that might be harder to do, too," with a half-laugh, as he turned face in the direction of the now distant Goose Neck. "We foolsh'd 'em pretty smooth, but maybe they're still nigh enough for a brush if you really feel inclined that way, sergeant."

"We'd ought to, anyway," growled the veteran, scowling, as he cast a half-veiled look toward his superior officer. "If the major would only—shake a petticoat in his face and—ugh!"

"Steady! Ho!" warned the Sport, his own brows gathering closer as he muttered the words. "She's a perfect lady, and I can't—"

Just then Major Piety turned that way, his fat face fairly aglow with eagerness, his tones husky with poorly veiled excitement, as he addressed the guide:

"I say, you!"

"Say it, major!"

"About these road-agents. Guide my men where we can find the infernal whelps of—ahem! Will you show us the way to them, sir?"

"We last glimpsed them over Goose Neck way, major. Of course, you know where that is?" coolly queried Foot-Hill Frank.

"Not while all tangled up in these blessed rocks, though! I've been completely lost for hours past, and I doubt if—come, man, dear! Act as our guide and I'll pay you your own price."

"Gladly, only for my previous engagement, major. As it is—"

"Will it take so long to point out the exact spot, Mr. Fitch?" asked Colonel Watkins, plainly anxious for the road-raiders to be brought to book, if only for their latest outrage.

"Oh, if that will serve—"

"Better that than nothing, of course. Lead the way, please," impatiently urged the quartermaster, with a wave of his gauntleted hand.

With a half-smile which certainly expressed no great awe of or reverence for the major, Foot-Hill Frank turned back on their trail sufficiently far to point out the wide sweep in the stage-road.

Nothing whatever was to be seen of the enemy now; yet it was certain the party could not have ridden many miles from the spot where last seen by the fugitives from the abandoned stage.

"You say you can't come with us, Fitch?" asked Clutterbuck, wistfully.

But the Sport shook his head in negation, saying:

"Not now, sergeant. I'm due at Nicodemus. If I was foot-free—but since I'm not, good luck attend you!"

Major Piety "hung in the wind" for a moment or two, looking from trail to lady, plainly preferring the last to the first; but as memory of his recent serious loss in dollars came back, he gave a profound bow which revealed his bald

crown to those half-laughing eyes, after which he clapped spurs to his horse and dashed off desperately in the direction of Goose Neck, closely attended by his armed escort.

"The sergeant's all right, and so are his men," observed Fitch, looking after the receding force for a few moments before again heading for Nicodemus. "But the major! It's like hitching on a baggage-train to a company of light cavalry in pursuit of Apaches! Heap of fuss-and-fury, but mighty little git-thar!"

"And that is the gentleman I was mistaken for, do you reckon?" asked the colonel, when they were once more fairly on their way and the squad of cavalry was lost to both sight and hearing.

"That is Major Dix Piety, yes. And—did he say anything about being held up, or robbed, colonel?"

"No, sir. Yet he surely seemed to be sorely worried, too!"

Foot-Hill Frank gave a little grunt at this, saying nothing, however. Of course, he had his own thoughts, but that seemed hardly the time or place to give them expression.

The ground lost through turning back to point out Goose Neck was quickly regained, and though the day was yet comparatively young, Foot-Hill Frank hurried rather than moderated his rate of progress.

He kept some little distance ahead of the party, eyes roving hither and yon, never at rest for long, always on the keen alert for—what?

Colonel Watkins ventured to put this same question, for his fatherly fears were being freshly awakened, thanks to this unusual vigilance.

"You are expecting fresh trouble, Mr. Fitch?" he added, uneasily.

"Trying to guard against any such, rather, colonel," came the swift response. "It's not at all likely we'll have any further trouble with the road-raiding gentry, yet so long as there's a lady in the case I hold it's better to be too cautious than not cautious enough."

"I thank you, sir! As her father, I thank you with all my heart."

"Don't mention it; it costs me nothing. And I'd do double as much any day just to foolish those imps o' the road!"

An hour later the mining town of Nicodemus was gained, and Foot-Hill Frank guided his newly-formed friends directly to the hotel which he himself patronized on occasion.

First assisting Rosamond to alight, giving her little hands a gentle pressure as he bade her good-bye, Frank turned toward the colonel, to whisper in grave warning:

"Make it perfectly clear who and what you are, sir! Don't leave any room for further mistaking you as Major Dix Piety, quartermaster, or you may see still further trouble."

"Then you really think—"

"Just what I say, sir—that as Colonel Watkins you'll be a mighty sight safer than as Major Piety. And let out the knowledge that you haven't any big boodle along with you, too!"

With that warning the guide would have turned away, but he was not to escape so easily as he thought.

Fair Rosamond caught his hand as he swung around, her great blue eyes gazing kindly into his jetty orbs, while she murmured:

"If I could only thank you, sir, for all you've done for us!"

"You can, Miss Watkins," with just the ghost of a smile lighting up his darkly handsome face the while. "Send me a bid to your wedding, and let me congratulate the happy groom!"

He turned away, leaving the maiden with curiously throbbing heart.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN WITH THE DROP.

Looking worn and weary, his fat cheeks hanging pendulous, wholly devoid of the "gay and jaunty" demeanor

which usually characterized him, Major Dix Piety sat his horse (substituted for the one dropped beneath the quartermaster by Reckless Jack Haltern) dejectedly, now and then heaving a doleful sigh as he stared half-vacantly down at the foam-flecked river in his front.

Their quest for road-raiders at or near Goose Neck had proved anything but a perfect success, and as a forlorn hope the major had bidden Clutterbuck secure a certain aide of whom the veteran spoke, himself riding on ahead to strike the river near the point where the daring outlaw had made his wild dash for life.

From gazing at the swiftly flowing waters where the death-stricken horse had made that blind leap to swifter death, Major Piety again picked his way down to the shallows below, and there he now sat in gloomy waiting for the sergeant's coming with scout and tracker.

Low indeed must have been he who could have envied the (more or less) gallant major just then!

Despite his long service in the Quartermaster Department, Dix Piety was by no means a rich man, and the loss of this large sum of money fell upon him with a crushing force, knowing as he did how surely it would be charged to his account, and have to be made good out of his own resources.

That reflection wrung another muffled curse from the major's lips, and he shook a fat fist at yonder lifeless carcass lying half-submerged on a shallow just above the ford.

"Cunning devil! If I only had you in my grip like—"

The sound of hoofstrokes cut his menace short, and, turning in saddle, Major Piety caught sight of Sergeant Clutterbuck coming up, accompanied by a footman.

Slouching along, with stooping shoulders and limpy hanging arms, head bowed and face nearly masked by a worn and greasy slouched felt, clothes torn here and patched there, this footman seemed anything rather than a stout reed for leaning upon in such an emergency as this!

So Major Piety decided in haste as the sergeant saluted, and so he plainly intimated when he gruffly spoke:

"Is this the—the fellow you spoke about, sergeant?"

"Yes, major. Speak up for yourself, Speed Harness!"

A sluggish nod, a slight uplifting of eyes toward the officer, then came the lazy drawl from those tobacco-stained and bearded lips:

"Ha-ow, boss!"

"Who, and what the devil are you, anyway, sir?"

"Jest me, boss. Jest Speed Harness, which—*he* done made me come, ef ye don't like the looks—*he* did!"

A still more provoking drawl, the fellow shrinking away from those angry and disgusted eyes. If he had not seemed too awfully lazy, one really might have looked for the fellow to break away in scuttling flight from that awe-inspiring frown!

As it was, Sergeant Clutterbuck deftly barred retreat with his horse, giving Mr. Harness a covert prod with the toe of a cavalry boot, while adding:

"He's like a singed cat in one respect, major—heap-sight better'n he looks! Shall I set him to work, sir?"

"If you can keep him awake long enough to listen, yes!"

That was done, although the trailer both looked and acted more sluggish than ever while the sergeant was tersely describing just what was expected of him.

"Whar did he take water?" asked Harness when Clutterbuck paused.

"Up-stream, between a quarter and a half-mile. Why?"

Speed Harness gave a slow grunt, drew in a long breath, then turned face in that direction, slouching along after his customary fashion, each and every

joint "on the loose," making one involuntarily watch to see the queer fellow fall apart all in a heap!

"Shall we follow, major?" asked Clutterbuck, quickly.

"Yes. Shoot him if he tries to dodge; run he can't."

Despite his apparent laziness, Speed Harness was some little ways ahead of the horsemen when he halted on the brink of that high bank, looking down upon the waters through means of which Reckless Jack Haltern had cheated his pursuers early that morning.

"Right hyar, was it?" asked the trailer when the sergeant came up.

"Yes. But, of course—careful, man! Do you want to break your fool neck?"

"Waal, no. Jest lookin' to see ef—rid right over, you say?"

"Forced his horse to take the leap, yes. We saw the animal going down-river, still struggling, but the man himself nowhere in sight!"

For the better part of a minute Speed Harness stood staring at the prospect below, once more leaning far over the brink to sweep the near shore with his half-closed eyes.

Drawing back, he took another full breath, pulling a rusty revolver from his girdle together with a wooden-handled butcher-knife, handing both to the sergeant as he drawled forth:

"Jest tote 'em fer me, boss. I'm gwine—"

"Where? What do you mean, man alive?"

"Waal, jumpin's easier'n walkin', an' you kin count in the resk when ye pay me, cain't ye?"

Before his actual purpose could fairly be realized, Speed Harness took a couple of steps forward, then jumped straight out from the bank, shooting downward like a human plummet, splitting the green water and vanishing from sight of the amazed sergeant an instant later.

"What is he—shoot the rascal!" fairly exploded Major Piety, taking that action as another desperate break for freedom.

Instead of obeying, Clutterbuck manueuvred his horse so as to hinder the major from using his pistols, giving a sharp cry as he caught sight of the fellow's head above water once more.

"He isn't trying to run away, but—look, sir!"

Speed Harness swam easily to the further shore, "treading water" when near enough to touch that little patch of driftwood, seemingly searching the bank beyond with his rat-like eyes.

Barely long enough thus for Major Piety to make him out; then the fellow turned to wave one dripping hand in their direction, calling out in far less sluggish tones:

"Hyar's one eend of a trail, anyway, boss! Ef ye'd ruther not come down my way, why, reckon ye kin back-track an' rock-slide—hey?"

"What have you discovered?" sharply cried the quartermaster.

"Whar some man-critter done clumb out o' the drink, right hyar; finger-prent too plain fer ary sort o' use!" was the prompt reply.

"You're sure—dead-certain, Harness?" asked Clutterbuck.

"Sure as sure, boss!" with perfect confidence. "I hain't tetched sho' yit, hev I?"

"No, but—"

"Waal, s'm'other critter hes, an' that sence day. Water fallin' fast 'nough to show so much. Man's hand; stuck in gumbo; onder water then, but shows right now. An'—thar's whar his toe tetched ag'in! Huh! Done reckoned he was a keener, but now—it's too dead easy, so fur!"

With a touch of disgust visible in his tones, Speed Harness let himself drift past the patch of debris, then landed on a convenient rock, casting a look upward as he spoke once more:

"Shell I look further, boss, or is that all ye keer to know?"

"What more can you cipher out first?"

"Waal, fust-of I knowed jest so much—he was eyther a blame' fool, or else a keener. Fer why? He mought 'a' slipped his critter, lettin' it hit the drink hard, while he drapped in 'mongst them rocks yander. Ef he wanted, thar he could 'a' lay low, snug's a bug in a rug ontel you-all was tired out huntin' him in the water.

"Waal, 'stead o' playin' sharp that-a-way, he plunks into the wet, ducks head onder the bresh hyar, then clumb out—like so-fashion!"

Speed Harness spoke quickly and distinctly enough now, changed in all save outward resemblance, as though man-hunting was his natural element.

His explanation carried conviction with it, and Major Piety likewise altered in tone and manner to correspond.

"Can you trail the rascal further, think?"

"Waal, I kin try, anyhow. Shell I?"

"Yes. We'll come around by the ford and join you as quickly as practicable. Follow him to earth—help run the devil down, and you can name your own reward!"

Something like a smile briefly showed itself beneath that shadowing hat, but the distance was too great for Major Piety to catch its full import, and Speed Harness was in no particular haste to express his fair meaning either.

Seemingly feeling no need of further chatter over the matter, the mountain vagabond sluggishly rose from the rock upon which he had been draining his clothes, climbing farther from the water's edge, then bending low to search for more sign.

That he was no novice at trail-hunting seemed fairly evident from the readiness with which he found and then followed the spoor over such unpromising ground; and when the soldiers had crossed over and worked their way within ear-range, Speed Harness had carried his find fairly out of sight and sound of the brawling stream.

"You're sure it's not all imagination? Certain the fellow passed right along here?" asked Major Piety, dubiously, after looking in vain for the sign which the vagabond condescendingly pointed out for his inspection.

"Sure as sartain, boss," came the cool assurance. "Thar was two of 'em passed right hyar—him as clumb out o' the drink at the drift, an' 'nother he-critter which j'ined in from dry walkin'."

"I believe you may trust him implicitly, sir," said the sergeant, in a low aside, as Harness once more bent over the trail, which certainly was imperceptible to less well-trained eyes.

For some minutes longer the vagabond led the way deeper into the broken and rising ground, only pausing when he found that further progress with the animals was out of the question.

A slow, keen look around, then Speed bluntly spoke up:

"Reckon ye'll hev to huff it, boss, onless—waal, mebbe ye'd ruther go 'round that way—eh?"

"Circle the rise, you mean?"

"Yas. Looks like the critter crossed plum' over hyar, an' ef so—you kin cut us off, that-a-way. Ef it breaks short o' that p'int, I'll make a sign so's ye kin see what's gone wrong. Sabe, boss?"

Major Piety looked perplexedly toward the sergeant, who nodded his head before speaking:

"He's right enough, sir; shall I show the way?"

The quartermaster grunted by way of assent, but Speed Harness never waited for that decision to be made.

He had been engaged to follow a trail, and that seemed to be as far as his ambition led, just then.

Paying no further heed to major or his escort, the mountain vagabond pressed on his way, bending low, the more surely to hold the scent, now growing fainter and less distinct as the soil grew

more sterile; but through it all the queerly looking and acting fellow held his own, picking up facts where many another good scout could only have seen fancies.

For possibly half an hour longer Harness followed the dim spoor, all energy of mind wrapped up in the difficult work, else the ending of that hunt might have been far different.

As it was, the first intimation he had of peril came in the shape of a clicking pistol-lock, and, looking up with a gasp and start, the trailer confronted a leveled revolver, while the man with the drop mockingly drawled forth the warning:

"Steady, bo! Kick and croak! Button lip or lose a shingle, pardner!"

CHAPTER X.

SPEED HARNESS IN LIMBO.

A more complete surprise was rarely met with.

Until the moment before wholly masked by bush and rock, the man with the drop now held the game wholly in his own hands.

A cool-brained, reckless fellow; too, unless all outward signs failed.

Seated upon a sloping rock, with one leg drawn up sufficiently far for his bent knee to afford easy support to his navy-six, the fellow grinned maliciously as he squinted over the death-tube.

Speed Harness mechanically moved right hand back toward his own weapons, but again came that cool voice in grim warning:

"Stop! Try to pull a gun and your family goes into deep mourning, Speed Harness! Hands up, pardner!"

"You, is it, Jack?"

"Jack, me no Jack, Speedy! You never saw me before, and you'll never see me behind, either, unless—business, bo!"

The trail-hunter drew himself erect, hands rising in meek submission, for right well he knew how worse than foolish would be any attempt to open resistance under the present circumstances.

"That's heap-sight more like it, hoss-furniture," approvingly declared the man with the drop, slipping off his hard perch and moving around to the rear of his captive.

Speed Harness would have turned in tune, but was checked as quickly.

"Never mind, dear boy; I'll not trouble you. Your back's enough sight handsomer than front-side, anyway! Steady, now! I'd really hate to salivate you, pardner, but—kick and toes turn up!"

With a deft touch the cool hand relieved his captive of all visible weapons, slipping the supply under his own belt for the time being; then speaking further:

"You're going my way for a weenty bit, Speedy. Don't say you're not, for of all things I do hate a liar!"

"Jest show me which is your way, boss, an' I'm gwine right that-a-way," earnestly assured the tracker, evidently resolved to make the best of a disagreeable matter.

"Of course you don't know without my telling you?"

"How should I, then?" with innocent amaze in face and voice.

"Then you wasn't tralling me down, Speedy?"

"Me? You? Good—Lawd—NO!"

"And those blue-backs, pardner? They're here just by chance, too, of course?" mocked the captor, at the same time springing on top of the sloping rock at full height, the better to overlook the surrounding obstacles.

So far as he could see no other enemy was within eye or ear range of that spot, and with uneasiness dispelled by that brief view, he sprang off the boulder to add in grimmer tones:

"Enough chaffing, pardner. Business now! Walk-chalk and act white or I'll lift your roof for the bugs to preempt your skull!"

Meekly enough Speed Harness yielded to what he could not safely resist, moving on in the direction indicated, once

more the sluggish, lazy-seeming, and slouchy vagabond, the first sight of whom carried disgust to the fastidious soul of Major Dix Piety.

Whether Reckless Jack Haltern was wholly deceived by this assumption or not, is hardly clear, but in either case he took no long chances, keeping close to the rear of his prisoner, yet sufficiently far away to render impracticable any surprise through swift whirl and desperate assault.

In curt if not gruff tones he gave such directions as he found necessary, pushing the surprised tracker up the hill at fair speed, yet at the same time guarding against discovery by Major Piety or his armed escort in blue.

When not far from the crest there came a low, barely audible sound, which caused Haltern to abruptly halt his prisoner, speaking harshly:

"No foolishness, now, Speed, or I'll lay you out too cold for skinning!"

"Good Lawd, boss! I shorely hain't—"

"Button up!" harshly interposed his captor, at the same time slipping thick kerchief from his own neck to bind over the eyes of his human prize. "Steady, I tell you! Play white and no particular harm shall come your way; but make a row and salt can't keep you from spoiling!"

Now, as before, the tracker meekly submitted, and when fully blindfolded he was turned swiftly around in his tracks, then grasped by the collar from behind and pushed blindly along once more.

All this came so suddenly that the trail hunter lost all sense of direction, and realizing as much, he gave over trying to keep tab on the many turns and sharp angles through which he was marched for several minutes after losing the light of day.

All of a sudden both legs were kicked from beneath him, and ere he could fairly rally from the stunning fall which naturally followed, Harness felt himself picked bodily up by a couple of unseen captors, to be hurried off a few rods further, then hustled inside an underground retreat of some description.

He was rudely dumped upon a hard surface, and there left to himself for a brief space; but he dared not lift hands to that hoodwink or try to better his situation in the slightest, for his strained ears could just catch the faint murmur of human voices at no great distance.

"Why didn't you lift his roof right there!" suddenly asked a stern and disagreeable voice, so close at hand as to give the hoodwinked scout a start. "Or, if that would make too much racket, why not slit his black heart wide instead of fetching him all this way to die by my hand?"

"Good—Lawd!" gasped Harness, huskily, yet with almost ludicrous readiness. "I kin wait, boss!"

Rough hands closed upon the scout, jerking him to a sitting posture, while fingers fumbled with the knotted kerchief behind his head.

"Waal, cap'n," came a gruff, strange voice from the opposite side. "We hed to lay out the cuss who was 'long with him—"

"Jack Haltern, was it?"

"Durned ef I'll tell ye, Cap'n South! Some fool critter who tried a gun-bluff, but we downed him too mighty quick!"

"All right, so far, but why fetch this fellow here?"

"Peared like he mought be wuth a heap, jedgin' from the way he was bein' tended, ye see, boss; but ef he's no good—shell I croak him?"

A breathless pause, during which the helpless prisoner must have felt anything but comfortable; but then he who answered to the title of Captain South, spoke again:

"No great rush; we'll have a look at the fellow, anyway. So—go easy, my pretty lad!"

The hoodwink was jerked away, and with a wink and a blink Speed Harness took in his present surroundings as far

as that dim and uncertain light would permit.

Directly in front of him stood a form of medium height, head and trunk thoroughly disguised by a grain-sack, through which holes had been cut for eyes and for arms.

To either side showed phantom-like figures, similarly disguised, but in just what force the tracker could not say, off-hand.

"Who, and what are you, fellow?" demanded that deep-pitched voice, coming from the figure in his front. "What object brought you to these hills, just now?"

Speed Harness evidently deemed it wisest to tell the truth, so far as he knew it, for he meekly gave an account of himself and actions.

He had been looked up at the Applebee cabin by Sergeant Clutterbuck, and enlisted as trail hunter.

"They promised big pay ef I did, an' heap-sight wuss ef I didn't," whiningly apologized the mountain vagabond. "How could I crawl out of doin' jest *this*, then? An' me skeered turrible nigh out o' my boots, too!"

"Who was it they wished you to track down?" demanded Captain South. "The truth, now! Lying will only make your punishment heavier."

"They never named no names, boss, to me," meekly declared the scout, shivering like one filled with apprehension. "They jest p'inted out whar they'd lost sight o' somebody, an' told me to hunt him up—or croak!"

A brief pause, during which two of those disguised shapes stole out of that rude retreat after the taller fellow had whispered a bit with the captain.

Then the chief of the road raiders abruptly changed the subject, asking about the Applebee family, at whose mountain home Speed Harness had been found by the sergeant that day.

"What are you after, anyway, fellow, hanging around that claim? You don't look much like a gay Lothario, but there's the little Applebee; is *she* the attraction—eh?"

"Miss Nell? *Me!*"

"Does that so startle you, pray? Isn't she a woman, hence to be wooed and won? Isn't she—"

"Good Lawd, boss! Ef Foot-Hill Frank was to ketch *me* lookin' squint-eyed *her* way—no, sir!"

"Foot-Hill Frank, is it?" quickly cut in the outlaw, but at the same time turning partially around toward the veiled entrance to that den.

Certain sounds came from that direction, and with a hand flung up by way of caution against noise, Captain South glided across to the entrance, crouching there for a brief space, with face close to an irregular crevice between the rocks.

Ears were of far better service just then than his eyes, however, and as he hearkened he heard enough to be certain that the squad of dismounted cavalry was coming that way, and already nigh enough the den for human voices to be distinguishable, even if words could not quite be made out.

Pausing there barely long enough to solve all doubts as to the one fact: making sure the enemy was heading almost directly that way. Captain South turned and hastened back to where Speed Harness was still standing under guard of those disguised men.

With a swift movement a heavy muffler was cast over the head and about the face of the prisoner, then he was tripped up to be laid flat on his face, with powerful hands drawing his limbs back for safe binding.

"Quiet, you hound!" hissed a voice in his ear as knife-point pricked his neck. "Make a sound and—you die like a dog!"

CHAPTER XI.

A BIT OF GRIM PLEASANTY.

The two fellows who stole so silently out from that dingy little den on the hill-side, wore their grain-sack disguises

until fairly clear of the place, then the taller member pulled his head-covering off, giving a half grunt of disgust as he did so.

"What flea's bitin' you, Jack?" asked his present mate, likewise unmasking, though a bit more leisurely.

"Augh! What's the use, anyway? But the cap'n would have it so, and of course that wasn't time or place to kick in."

"About playin' roots on the critter, Jack?"

"Sure!"

"Waal, cap. didn't want to show up too mighty plain, like; an' I do reckon he hed the rights of it, now!"

"I don't think!"

"Why fer?"

"Just like this: one of two things. Either that lad is a fool, or a keener, all the more dangerous through looking so sleepy. Understand?"

"I know what ye say, Jack, but—"

"If a fool, he didn't need tricking. If a keener, the trick came all too late, after I'd showed my face and he'd called my name. If killing is to follow, no need of horse-play. If not—if Harness is to be let go in the end, with wind into him, wouldn't it been easier to make him take all as a rough-edged joke, than to show our colors as—this?"

Reckless Jack held out that disguise once more, lip curling with scorn, then doubling one end to tuck the sack under his belt behind his back, where it would be safe, yet leave both hands at liberty.

Billy Poteet scratched his head dubiously, then ventured:

"Waal, what made ye hitch onto the blame critter, anyway, Jack? Ef ye didn't want, why not drap him, cold?"

"That smells too mighty much slaughter-house, Billy! Then, the lad was picking up our trail like smoke. And the boss—but what's the use so long's you're happy?"

Jack Haltern cast aside all care with airy grace, moving ahead at a brisk pace, yet in every action showing a degree of caution which his comrade found no little difficulty in duplicating.

A few moments spent after this fashion, then Haltern paused, parting the screen of bushes before them, looking forth with apparent interest.

"What is it, anyway, Jack?" asked Poteet in a husky whisper.

"Take a squint for yourself, Billy—so! Button lip, though!"

Scattered over the slope, now in full sight, now vanishing behind some bush or one of the many huge rocks with which the mount was liberally sprinkled, were the soldiers acting as escort to Major Dix Piety.

The worthy quartermaster himself was visible, looking sorely jaded, sadly rumpled as to clothes and ruffled in temper, red of face and scant of breath, just then leaning against a friendly boulder while he cursed his luck, his guide, his escort—all and everything with most amusing impartiality.

"Where the demon has he gone to—anyway, sergeant?" Piety fairly roared as some of his wind came back to his laboring lungs. "Playing us double, or—shout for him, can't you, man?"

Sergeant Clutterbuck obeyed promptly enough, but only the echoes of his own loud voice made reply.

Jack Haltern chuckled in high glee as he drew back from the little ambush, motioning for Billy Poteet to follow close upon his heels, neither man pausing again until at a fairly safe distance from those befooled boys in blue.

Then Reckless Jack gave full vent to his pent up mirth, laughing until he was forced to clasp both sides with his sun-bronzed hands to relieve the strain upon his ribs.

"Blame sight mo' fun then I kin see, anyhow!" grumbled Poteet, after a somewhat forced chuckle on his own part.

"Oh, well, Billy, you never could see a point until after you'd sat right down on it," easily asserted Haltern, rousing up for more definite action. "I was

laughing at Old Pussy-middle, yonder. If ever he forgets this jolly dance—well, I guess not!"

"Ef he was to stumble over the hole, though?"

"Don't you think it, Billy! The hole's all right, and so is the boss. He can guard his own head, while we—I say, Billy?"

"Keep on sayin' of it, then, blame ye!" grumbled Poteet, who appeared to be in a far less jolly state of mind than his off-hand mate.

"You couldn't fairly join in my snicker just now, but I'll give you something broad enough to fetch a snort even from your gravity, if—are you game for t joke, Billy?"

"What sort o' joke?"

"All right; I'll show you, Billy, boy! Come on, pardner. Just a weenty bit further, and—this way, bo!"

Reckless Jack played guide for a few rods further, then paused once more, speaking in lowered tones, as Poteet ranged alongside.

"Take a squint through the bush, Billy, and tell me what you see."

"Nothin' but some hosses—an' a man-critter, which—"

"Just so! Major Piety left them there, with one of his blue-backs to play horse-guard," tersely explained Haltern. "Now, Billy, if you'll back me up—will you, though?"

"You know it, Jack! What's to do?"

"Play monkey with that blue-back first of all. We can creep close enough to make a jump squarely on his back, and then—well, Billy, maybe you'll see what you will see!"

Now that there was actual work before him, Billy Poteet proved the sound judgment of Reckless Jack in selecting him as a fellow in that wild escapade, grumbling no longer, but falling to work with cool nerve and ready comprehension.

Putting on their clumsy but effective disguises once more, the two pards crept silently toward the level tract of thinly-grassed ground, where the horses had been temporarily abandoned, as worse than useless for further advance through that rough and broken lay of country.

Broken of his rest the past night, having been almost constantly in the saddle for the last forty hours, the horse-guard now fairly dozed upon his feet, kept from lying down for "forty winks" only and solely by the force of stern discipline.

All this made it by no means a difficult task to surprise him, and so the two disguised shapes crept silently up in his rear, until near enough to make a swift and sure leap upon their victim.

The two outlaws acted in perfect concert, Haltern giving "the garrote" with practiced skill, while Poteet pinned both arms tightly to the luckless guard's sides, and then, with a dexterous jerk and twist the cavalryman was brought to earth, flat upon his face, falling with force sufficient to drive the breath out of his body for a brief space.

Long enough to twist a close muffler over his mouth, into which a prepared knot was crowded ere the ends were knotted back of his neck.

This was the work of Reckless Jack, while Poteet stripped the man of his side-arms, thus effectually "pulling his teeth," to use his own expression.

"Steady! Up ye come like a—stand at ease, Uncle Samuel!" mocked Haltern, safe in his rude disguise, as he fairly lifted the bewildered horse-guard to his feet and held him there until he could regain his balance.

The poor fellow essayed to speak, but that indistinct mumble quickly died away as the hooded outlaw flourished an ugly-looking knife before the soldier's eyes ferociously crying:

"Button up or off comes your smeller, boy! Make a whimper loud enough to skeer a sleeping weasel, and I'll—what will I do, mate?"

"Slice 'im in strips fer to braid a bull-

whip!" promptly croaked the second mask, with blood-curdling emphasis.

"Augh! you're too easy on him, pardner!" declared the taller demon as he turned his head to spit over one shoulder in disgust. "That's the way I punish my pet kid when he uses his sleeve for a handkerchief! As for this lame duck—will you 'have yerself, then, Sammy?"

What could the poor fellow do but sign assent?

Wholly helpless, without weapons or the use of his hands, while he was confronted by two thoroughly armed desperadoes, either one of whom looked as though he might have proved a fair match on equal footing.

Halter made a swift sweep of his glittering blade, the cool flat of which fairly grazed the sun-burnt nose of the horse-guard in passing.

Both knaves laughed maliciously as the soldier flinched, as though neither one of them would have acted the same under like circumstances.

His hands clenched tightly, but that was all. To resent the trick could only fetch worse upon himself, and, so reasoning, the soldier bided his time.

With unarmed hand Haltern loosened the belt from about the cavalryman's middle, kicking it toward Poteet while speaking:

"Open a cartridge or two, pardner, and make a dope; I'll be ready for it as soon as you are, I reckon. Now—steady, Sammy! Play you're a blushing bride on your wedding-eve, while I'm your maid—see?"

With swift movements the hooded knave stripped his victim to the middle, casting the garments aside as wholly superfluous.

Poteet twisted bullets out of several cartridges, pouring the powder upon a smooth piece of slate, then mixing it to a thin paste with spittle.

"Change pardners! Hold him steady, bo!" chucklingly spoke the taller road raider, resigning charge of the prisoner to take up that improvised palette and stir its mixture with the tip of his forefinger. "Now—who says I can't paint a picture that fairly talks?"

With swift, bold strokes the outlaw daubed the moistened powder on that broad, white back to suit his taste, then drawing back a bit to cock his head on one side and fairly roar with laughter over his own conceit.

"Steady, canvas-back!" he cried in warning as the soldier twisted uneasily. "It's doing you no harm, and when the major claps eyes upon it all—glory to Abraham! Wouldn't wonder if he'd beg you to let him have the picture photographed, just to remember last night by—yes!"

"What ye doin', aryhaw, pardner?" asked Poteet, curiously, from his position in front of that reluctant signboard.

"That's all right, matey, and you can see for your own self after we get fairly through. For now—lend a hand, will you?"

Between the two strong-armed knaves the soldier was lifted from his footing and placed upon one of the horses, seated squarely enough in the saddle, but—with face toward tail instead of head!

A trail-rope was cut, one portion binding him fast to the saddle, the other moiety being used to connect his ankles beneath the animal's belly, after which a carbine was placed in his reluctant hands, there tied fast with strips cut from his own belt. And the weapon, too, was reversed to match his awkward position.

Hugely enjoying this grim jest, but warned by common prudence not to draw it out to dangerous length lest they be surprised in turn, the road raiders drew away from their victim a bit, Haltern speaking:

"There you are, pardner! Sweet as a peach, pretty as a picture, enough to make any heart go pit-a-pat at first glimpse of your git-up! And the major—which reminds me.

"When old Pussy-middle comes back this way and asks ye how come ye so, don't try to lie, but tell the truth and shame your grandfather! Tell him to gaze upon your frescoed rear, and commit the double text to memory, if only to keep fresh in mind the little trick we played him last night!"

"If he is still in the dark, just tell him to charge it all up to my account; to Captain North, king of the road and emperor of all toll-takers!"

"Tell him to call and see me whenever he has another big boodle to get shut of so easy, for I am—A-mity Big Sell, and my beloved daughter is A Daisy on ten wheels!"

With another laugh the mocker sprung away, followed by his mate.

CHAPTER XII.

MAJOR PIETY'S TRIBULATIONS.

Meanwhile, all unsuspecting what a malicious joke was being cut at his expense through the luckless horse-guard, Major Dix Piety had been toiling through yonder rugged rocks, dragging his aching corporosity through or around the scrubby bushes which alone relieved the weary grayness of that sterile slope.

And now, both wind and patience gone, he dropped down upon one of those flat rocks, puffing and panting, thoroughly out of sorts with himself, his surroundings, and, in fact, the whole world besides.

It seemed as though hours and hours had been spent thus since they lost sight and sound of the tracker, and now Major Piety felt sure of what he had been earliest to suspect; that scout and guide was an infernal fraud, bent on wasting their valuable time, if nothing worse!

Following the directions briefly given by Speed Harness, the little party had circled around that hill, waiting on the opposite side for sight or signal; but neither rewarded their watch.

And then, when the tracker was called by name, when actual search for the recreant was made, this was the sole result!

"Curse him! Curse you—curse everything, I say!" fairly roared the enraged quartermaster as Sergeant Clutterbuck ventured a bit nearer the official under whose command he had been placed for the occasion.

The veteran stood in silence, not unlike some grim statue of bronze and blue, muscles wholly unchanging through all that storm of curses and revilings.

For Major Piety spared naught now the flood-gates of his naturally choleric temper had given way. He cursed a blue streak, to employ the vernacular, ceasing only when breath, not words, failed him for the moment.

"Have you any further commands, Major Piety?" coldly asked the sergeant, still standing at salute.

"Go to the devil, and—"

"Present, sir," coolly quoth the veteran, never cracking a smile.

The quartermaster sprung clumsily to his feet, one hand dropping on sword-hilt as though he would slash across those grimly mocking lips; but if such had really been the temptation, 'twas let pass unimproved.

Outwardly all discipline, all subordination, yet something glowed in those dark eyes which warned the major against crowding the veteran too far just then.

"Commands? Yes! Find that slippery devil whom you brought to—if I could only grip—the devil!"

Major Piety dropped back upon the cracked rock before speaking thus, but his savage tirade upon Speed Harness was brought to a sudden ending, thanks to an awfully ominous sound which came from about the frost-eaten rock upon which the major's huge bulk had so heavily descended.

A sound which few can forget after once fairly hearing—the shrill and

metallic *skir-r-r!*—through which a disturbed rattlesnake gives grim warning of hovering death!

At almost the same instant Major Piety gave a wild howl as he felt the biting stroke upon his rear, and plunging blindly forward, he tripped and fell headlong, hands clapped to his injured seat of honor, spurred boots kicking wildly, groans and curses and cries for aid rushing forth from his lips in a confused flood.

Sergeant Clutterbuck likewise heard that ominous sound, else he might easily have believed this a fit of horrid insanity on the part of his superior officer; but with a loud shout which served to rally his men without delay, the veteran grasped the major and pinned him fast to the ground in spite of his frantic struggles.

"Quick men!" Clutterbuck cried out as the cavalymen came rushing up to the spot. "Snake-bite! Kill the rattler if you see it, but—give me what whisky there is in the crowd; lively, now!"

"Oh, Lord! Bitten—poisoned like a—help me, sergeant!" gasped the suffering creature. "Cut it out! Draw the poison or—burn it out before—whisky—give me whisky, or I'm—oh, Lord!"

All was confusion and excitement, for right well these fellows knew what danger there lay in the bite of crotalus in that arid region, where such poison works with awful rapidity unless instant means be taken to neutralize its baleful effects.

None knew all this better than did Sergeant Clutterbuck, and still kneeling astride the fat body of the quartermaster, holding the major down in spite of all his struggles to break away in his temporary insanity, he felt with one hand for a knife, while swiftly speaking:

"Lend me a hand here, a couple of you fellows! Hold him fast while I—steady, now!"

With both hands thus set free for use, Clutterbuck slit open the trousers worn by the major, making a cross-cut as well, then laying bare the fat flesh, where a couple of blood-drops plainly marked the spot where those keen points had found entrance.

"Heavens! nearly an inch between the teeth! A he-old—steady, all! I've got to—just got to, major!"

The keen point of the knife cut through skin and probed the sensitive flesh, drawing a muffled groan and howl from Piety's lips.

Giving him no further heed, for he felt sure all was being done for the very best, Sergeant Clutterbuck twisted a bullet from a cartridge, then from another, pouring the powder upon the bleeding wound, to apply a glowing match-end an instant later.

A blue puff shot up, and with a frantic roar of pain the fat sufferer shook off those trying to hold him steady, scrambling to his feet and dashing blindly down the slope, stopped only by violent contact with a gray boulder too high for him to tumble clean over.

Before he could work worse injury to himself, however, Sergeant Clutterbuck was at his side, one hand gripping an arm tightly, the other holding neck of flask to his lips, while speaking:

"Drink hearty, sir! It's the very best thing you can do, for—"

He broke off, evidently feeling further urgings were superfluous, for Piety had fastened upon the flask, sucking at its mouth more eagerly than ever hungry babe sought the fount supplied by nature!

Not until the flask was fairly drained did that furious suction cease, and then only hoarsely to gasp:

"More—gi' me more! I feel—oh, Lord! I'm swelling up like a drum! I'm full of—oh, heavens! why should it be me, who—can't you do something, boys?"

"There's no more liquor nearer than where we left the horses, sir," gravely

said the sergeant, his face looking to the full as troubled as his voice surely sounded.

Was it true, or merely imagination? Was the poison beginning to increase that already huge bulk?

Major Piety seemed fairly beside himself with terror, yet he retained sufficient sense to head in the right direction as he groaned:

"Take me there! I'm poisoned like a mad wolf! I must—get me more whisky, or—oh, hurry—hurry—hurry!"

A sharp word brought help to his side, and between the sergeant and the soldiers Major Piety was rushed down the slope and to the spot where the horses had been abandoned for the time being.

There another disagreeable surprise awaited the party, although the grim jest was wholly lost upon the personage for whose especial benefit it had been perpetrated, and Major Piety never even glanced at the facetiously decorated back of the humiliated horse-guard.

Sergeant Clutterbuck grated his teeth savagely as he read the two names rudely printed across that broad back: "A-mity Big Sell." "A. Daisy Sell."

He interpreted its full meaning only too readily, and ground an oath betwixt his teeth as he swiftly obliterated the marks, leaving only an indistinct blur, then bidding the crestfallen soldier don his clothes.

Meanwhile Major Piety was draining another flask of whisky, fortunately (or otherwise) more nearly full than had been the first.

The soldiers were hurriedly preparing the horses for the road, for a word let fall by their sergeant gave them the right clew.

"He's hit hard, and we've got to strike a better camp than any we can pitch around here. That's Old Applebee's, cross-country, yonder!"

Tossing a cavalry coat over one of the largest saddles, Sergeant Clutterbuck motioned a couple of his men to lend a hand, and between them they hoisted the groaning major bodily upon the horse elected to bear such a crushing burden; for, of course, the sufferer could hardly be expected to ride without further support than his own shattered will.

Thus the ride was begun, and thus it was pressed as rapidly as possible, the lightest cavalryman seated *en croupe*, and steadying the major upon his uneasy seat, while another hand guided the patient beast.

Major Piety drained the second flask, then begged for more; vowing that already he could feel the horrible poison creeping up toward his heart, tearing and wrenching, clawing and stinging, all fire and flames!

But there was not another drop of liquor in the party, and all they could do was to rush their flight as swiftly as the nature of the ground to be covered would permit, trusting to find further antidotes at the mountain home of Old Jonathan Applebee.

Now that the first wild flurry was past, Sergeant Clutterbuck could view matters a bit more critically, and his fears of a fatal termination gradually grew less acute; for it was now past doubting Major Piety was positively growing drunk!

"Fat and whisky together!" muttered the veteran to himself as he took these notes. "Rattler can't faze a fat hog, they say so—why knock him, then?"

There was no room left for doubting—Major Piety was not only becoming so, but he was already drunken!

His groans changed to grunts, and even queer sounds, which might, by a vast stretch of imagination, be called humming—love-songs, too!

Merely snatches, broken by doleful plaints, hollow groans, impotent curses, and more frequently pleadings for more whisky.

And it was in this doubtful condition that the gallant major came first into view of the Applebee cabin on the mountain, and he glimpsed a comely figure in yonder wide-open door to involuntarily exclaim:

"Holy sacrifice—what's that? An—angel, Clut, ole boy?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAJOR'S BAD BREAK.

As he spoke, the quartermaster gave a lurch in the saddle, which very nearly resulted in a fall to earth; but the strong arm of Sergeant Clutterbuck prevented a worse mishap, and then his reply came:

"It's the woman of the house, sir, and—this is Applebee's place."

"Apple? Who said apple? She's a—peach, sir! She's a—eh! Am I dead, and is this—ur—heaven—already?"

"Steady, Potter!" in swift warning to the trooper who rode behind the major. "If he falls going down this slope, I wouldn't—easy, now!"

At some little risk to both man and beast the sharp descent was finally accomplished, Clutterbuck by no means in as great a hurry now as he had been when that forced march was begun.

For one thing, he held implicit faith in whisky as the one supreme antidote for snake-bites, and part of that faith was that when drunk came in, danger had to fly out of the patient.

And, beyond all doubting, Major Dix Piety was drunk!

Not yet past the point of helping himself, or even of putting on a fair front when the occasion seemed to demand, for even now, having just caught a glimpse of a more than ordinarily comely young woman in that open doorway, the amorous major was beginning to prink and to prank after a wonderously coltish fashion!

For a bit he actually seemed to forget how dangerously nigh to grim death's door he had been brought by venomous fangs, and had it not been that his heels slipped beneath his clumsy weight on touching ground in front of that humble mountain home, letting his bulk strike mother earth with more force than grace or comfort, memory might still have failed.

"Heavenly grace uphold me!" Piety groaned, easing that fresh smart of inflamed wound as well as he knew how. "Help me up and inside where I can die a Christian death or—curse everything and every—if I only had that—fire and furies, I say!"

Pretty Nell Applebee saw and heard quite sufficient to send her in swift retreat toward the rear of the cabin, but her place was taken by Old Applebee himself; tall, stoop-shouldered, snowy-haired, with beard of patriarchal length falling over his chest.

"Help him inside, lads—with your kind grace, Mr. Applebee," hurriedly spoke the sergeant, lifting at one fat arm to restore that destroyed equilibrium as quickly as might be.

"Sartain—sartain, gentlemen," came the hearty response, as the old man made way for their entrance. "Looks like he was in a turrible bad way, shorely! It isn't—not wuss then—eh, sergeant?"

"Snake-bite," crisply explained Clutterbuck in answer to the significant pantomime indulged in by Old Applebee. "Looked mighty serious for a while, but—well, guess he'll get over it, now!"

Major Piety was assisted into the cabin and placed in a substantial chair, giving a husky groan of pain as he settled down, but in his next breath calling for whisky to help counteract the virulent poison with which his whole system was now impregnated.

"Oh, I'm bit all to—to pieces!" he dolefully wailed, all manhood driven out of his huge bulk by fear of death by poison. "Oh, what demon's own

luck! Why wasn't it somebody else? Why did I—right on the infernal thing, and it—oh, I saw it! I saw it and—'twas big through as my leg where—oh, do something, can't you—all? Don't let me—a sup of whisky for love of heaven!"

Old Applebee produced a small stone jug which gave a faint gurgle as he shook it on drawing the cork, but ere he could pour out any of its scanty contents, Major Piety snatched at it as a drowning man might at the proverbial straw, drinking greedily out of the receptacle itself. "Let him swill, sir!" muttered the sergeant as Applebee gave a low cry of anxious warning. "There'll be no rest for any of us until he's had a sleeping drunk clean through, now! And—yet it surely was a bad snake-bite, too!"

Fortunately for the sufferer, however, there proved to be but a very few swallows of liquor in the jug, and that none of the most powerful.

Piety drained off the last drop, then let the jug fall unheeded, drawing a long breath and staring around the humble apartment with eyes dulling in spite of the moisture following intoxication.

As will sometimes happen in like cases, this last draught seemed partially to sober the drunken man, instead of making him worse; and as the quartermaster began to take note of his present surroundings: to see various little hints and indications of the gentler sex in furniture or ornaments: he once more straightened up to quicken his glances, possibly with a dim recollection of the fair vision he had caught just before reaching that mountain home.

"Where is—was it an angel, or merely my—hic!—eh, sergeant?"

"This is Mr. Applebee, major," quickly interposed Clutterbuck, with wave of hand calling attention toward the old gentleman. "He has kindly assisted you to kill the snake-bite which—"

"Mr. Apple—hic!—peach, I tell you, Clut! Don't I know one from t'other when I—hic!—taste it? Don't I know—where is he, anyway? Why don't—was it here you found that—his!—infernal fraud, sergeant?"

"Oh, that's all right, major," soothingly spoke the veteran, his honest face flushing with shame which his superior officer was past feeling, just then.

"All right? All wrong, I tell you, sir!" exploded Piety, gesticulating furiously, rage serving to clear away the drunken hiccoughs, if not lessen the disease he was then laboring under.

"I demand an explanation, sirs! I demand to know—to be satisfied as to the—demon, sir! That fraud is—was—who is he, sir, I demand, sir! Who is he, I demand, sir?"

Jonathan Applebee slowly stroked his long beard, as he slowly shook his head, broad and generous sympathy beaming in his big blue eyes the while.

"Queer—awful cur'us how it does work with dif'rent persons, an' that's a fact, Sergeant! Pore critter! He's mighty nigh loony, but I'm not one to lay it up hard ag'inst him; no, I'm not layin' it up ag'inst the pore gentleman!"

Major Piety was sitting perilously erect now, chest inflated and chin drawn back, arms akimbo, and fat hands propped on fatter knees, eyes looking with awful dignity through his bushy brows, as his red forehead contracted in a portentous frown.

Very like a grim judge on woolsack he, just then!

"No evasion, sir! The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the—the—confound it, sir! I demand an answer, sir! This—what name was it, sergeant?"

"Do you mean Speed Harness, major?"

"Yes, sir! I do, sir! And I demand—I firmly demand a thorough explanation from this—this male peach, sir! I demand—who the devil is this Spurn Pedis? Where did he—hic!—from! All about him on penalty of—of hanging, sir! Yes, sir! Hanging, sir!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck frowned darkly.

but all-powerful discipline restrained both tongue and hand for the time being. Still, he whispered in a hurried aside:

"Tell him what you know, sir, for he'll never choke off without. Lie, if you'd rather foolish the old—augh!"

An unusual tinge of color was coming into that venerable face, and Jonathan Applebee certainly showed no personal fear or shrinking as he confronted the drunken quartermaster.

"What do you want to know, sir? As for Speed Harness, he's just stopping with us, promiscuous-like."

"An infernal fraud! If not allied with these cursed road-raiders, he's—worse! Didn't he—I believe he stole the money which—if it isn't the angel! the peach! the—angel takes it, by glory!"

Until now Nell Applebee had kept well out of sight, shrinking from the specimen she had already seen; but as that angry voice raised in drunken menace, the daughter overpowered the maiden, and Nell came forward to help her aged parent if needed.

Remarkably charming the mountain maid looked, just then, too, and the first sight of her face gave the drunken officer another turn of mind, possibly more disagreeable if a bit less dangerous than the other.

With elephantine grace Major Piety rose to his feet, legs widely planted the better to support his top-heavy person, one fat hand spreading over his heart, the other curving outward with intended grace to match his amorous bow.

"At your pretty feet, ma'am! Behold me—hic—prostrate at the shrine of—of beauty! I never thought to rejoice over my loss, but since that fetches me to such—such charming grace and beauty and—who cares for money, anyway?"

He essayed a flourish which partially destroyed his none too perfect balance, causing him to lurch heavily forward to keep from literally casting himself at the feet of beauty!

Nell shrunk back, while her father lifted an arm to repel the drunken Lothario; but Piety rudely struck that aside, at the same time lurching in between the twain, huskily speaking in that same vein:

"What's money? Who frets over even such a loss as—why, sweetheart! I'm just made of money! I bed down my nags every night in double-refined gold-dust! I can—oh, now, Pretty! What's the use pretending to shy off like—I say, Sweetness—"

"Don't mind him, Nell; he's drunk as a dog! It's wuss'n rattler pizen, too!" indignantly cried Old Applebee, lifting hand to foil that attempt to grasp the frightened girl. "Git out o' this, you mis'able critter, you! Ef ye dast to even tetch my Nell like—"

With a heavy stroke which chance rather than skill landed most effectually, Major Piety drove the old man back, to trip and fall heavily upon the floor. Then he grasped Nell about the waist, drawing her closer to himself and speaking through pursed-up lips:

"Come, Pretty Pet! Ransom old graybeard with a kiss of honey, or I vow he shall suffer death by the—"

The victim of "snake-antidote" was not permitted to finish his maudlin threats, for just then something very like a cyclone in 'ts effects struck the mountain home, carrying all before it!

CHAPTER XIV.

FOOT-HILL FRANK TO THE FRONT.

Only one man, and he by no means as big as a mountain, yet that one man scattered those cavalymen to either hand, dashing in through that open doorway, sending stalwart Sergeant Clutterbuck reeling dizzily to the left hand, then fastening upon Major Piety and handling him much as a terrier might shake life out of a rat.

Only one man, but—he was Foot-Hill Frank, the Fancy Sport!

Peacefully coming from town after safely escorting Colonel and Miss Watkins safely to their destination, thinking no evil, foreseeing no more trouble; only to hear frightened Nell Applebee scream aloud as that drunken clutch was fastened upon her person and those whisky-painted lips dared to approach hers!

One breathless instant for steadying himself, then the mad rush!

"You infernal whelp!" fiercely exploded the Sport as he struck Major Piety, a blow full in his face as he turned at that cyclonic charge. "Dare to lay hands on my love! Oh, I'll kill you like a—now!"

The drunken quartermaster released the maiden, partly stunned by that blow, wholly confused by that steel-like grip, yet blindly struggling to strike back and break away at one and the same time.

Another vicious thrust of iron knuckles drove his head back and caused his fat hands to fly upward.

A swift jerk and resistless whirl turned Piety half-way around, face to the front entrance, toward which he was rushed by the enraged athlete, whose booted foot completed the assault, sending the unworthy wearer of army blue endlong through the doorway to strike on hands and knees half a dozen feet past the threshold.

With bewildering rapidity all this was accomplished, and then Foot-Hill Frank, his left arm claspings Nell's yielding waist, faced the soldiers with drawn and cocked navy-six, sternly crying aloud:

"Steady, the lot of ye! I don't care to do it, but if I must shoot, I'll shoot to kill!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck was one of the first to rally, yet even he would have been all too slow had nasty work been imperative, for as he came toward the middle of the room that pistol had him lined.

"Steady, I say!" grimly warned the lover again.

"Don't shoot!" hastily cried the veteran, lifting empty hand with palm to the front. "We're white men, and—"

"White be — blamed!" fiercely and scornfully cut in the Fancy Sport, pale as a corpse with half-smothered rage as he recalled that one glimpse of his beloved in that loathsome clutch. "When a lady is vilely assaulted by a pack of drunken curs?"

"By only one such, sir," and the sergeant's voice lowered a bit as he flashed a brief glance over his shoulder. "The major, not us, sir."

"The major! You merely looked on, was it?" sneered Fitch, rage seeming to increase rather than diminish with each passing moment. "Bah! you curs! Go doff that uniform, meant only for white men! You doubly disgrace the army when you witness such foul doings, then try to excuse yourselves by pleading the baby act!"

"If you only stop to think, Fitch—"

"To think, is it?" with a short, fierce laugh that sounded far more deadly than curses could have done, as he gently pushed Nell away, stepping a bit nearer the sergeant while adding: "Go outside, and go in a hurry, too! This is an honest man's castle, and just now I'm acting as his representative. Out, I say—all of ye!"

"But, Foot-Hill—" expostulated Clutterbuck, to no avail.

"Go out of this, I tell you for the last time! Out, or by the blue sky above us I'll carry you out a corpse!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck did go out, his face hotly flushed, but scarcely with fear for himself, to do him full justice.

His eyes fairly glowed with fire as he caught sight of the prime cause of all this trouble, now staggering to his feet, clothes torn and soiled, face bruised and bleeding where those iron knuckles had cut through the puffy skin and flesh.

Foot-Hill Frank followed the retreating sergeant as far as the threshold, pausing there with a cocked pistol in either

hand, flashing fierce defiance upon the armed escort, one and all.

"I kicked your foul-mouthed, drunken cur of a master out, and now—take up his cause, ye curs!" came his stern defiance in words which surely left no room for misunderstanding.

Ugly scowls and muttered words marked the growing resentment felt by the cavalymen, but Sergeant Clutterbuck flung up an empty hand as he sternly spoke:

"Silence in the ranks!"

Then he glanced toward the disgraced quartermaster, seeing that Major Piety was too thoroughly bewildered to take note of just what was going on or being said; and, feeling safe on that score, the honest disciplinarian freed his mind at least in part.

"You served him just right, Mr. Fitch, only—pity you didn't give him just a weenty bit more while about it!"

"What I gave him, can come to others if—"

"Don't quite say it like that, please," quickly cut in the veteran, an open hand flying up in protest. "I meant to take action my own self, on honor, if you hadn't come in just then, Fitch. You served him right, but—if I had done the same thing, 'twould be a court-martial; see?"

By this time both father and daughter had rallied sufficiently to add their plea for peace, and gradually the athlete's fierce fury cooled down, although his rancor against the drunken quartermaster still burned brightly.

Brief explanations were offered and accepted, and when the prime excuse for that intoxication was fairly explained, Foot-Hill Frank was in far better shape for listening to apologies.

While all this was taking place, Major Piety gradually rallied from the heavy shock he had received, and though Sergeant Clutterbuck essayed to make him comprehend that he would better wait for a more favorable moment, he persisted in a maudlin explanation and too-profuse apology.

"Twas all because of his cursed luck! First came the loss of his money—a fortune in itself!

Then the swift-crowding events, culminating in the bite of a poisonous serpent and the only fitting antidote within reach, all of which in combination proved too much for his sorely tasked brain.

"But, sir, I'm a gen'leman, sir, an' I'll never rest easy until I can wipe away—hic!—away the—hic!—I've lost all but my—hic!—honor, be-gad, sir!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck closed a hand on his arm as the major swayed unsteadily before his little audience of three, one and all of which showed something of the scorn and disgust actually felt, but the officer resisted, and would have maundered on and on, only for the action taken by Foot-Hill Frank.

Gently removing the little hand with which Nell Applebee would have restrained him, the Sport stepped forth, one hand gripping Major Piety's shoulder, the other lifted to slowly shake before those whisky-reddened eyes while he distinctly spoke:

"Just another word for you, Major Piety, please!

"You're not fit to talk to or reason with just now. You're drunk; drunk as a hog in a mash-tub! If not—if you were even half-way sober—I tell you flatly I'd hammer you to pulp or shoot you full of holes as I might a mad wolf!"

"As it is—listen, I say!

"Go your way now, but bear this much in mind: I'll see you again when you are sober. Then—you'll apologize to this lady, or I'll make you wish you'd never been born into this world!"

Giving the dazed quartermaster a little shove in which lay more contempt than remaining hatred, Foot-Hill Frank turned to step back into the house, while Sergeant Clutterbuck steadied his superior officer by an arm, making as though to hurry him off the scene before he

should make a bad enough matter even worse.

As he swung Piety partially around, one of his men called forth:

"They're coming, sergeant! That's Markley and—the doctor, sure!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck gave a little start and low exclamation as he swiftly faced in the direction pointed out, for he had forgotten having dispatched a rough-rider posthaste to Nicodemus in quest of a physician as soon as he fairly realized what mishap had befallen the major.

The report was true enough, since yonder leading horseman surely was Trooper Markley, while only a few rods to his rear galloped a second rider, in citizen apparel.

Seeing this, and naturally forgiving by nature, Jonathan Applebee generously offered the snake-victim shelter for the time being, but that was instantly vetoed by the less placable Fitch.

"Wait until the doctor can examine him, Daddy. If really in danger from the bite, that's different, of course. But, judging from looks, he's too mighty full of a different sort of poison!"

Sergeant Clutterbuck led his superior officer toward the little spring which gurgled forth from beneath a wide ledge of rocks, where a sort of semi-privacy might be counted on, then welcomed the doctor with far more eagerness than that worthy disciple of Esculapius was accustomed to receive from the boys in blue.

"Snake-bite, eh?" his professional eye already taking notes, his grizzled pate bobbing vigorously as he added: "Whisky, eh? That's good—very good indeed! Nothing better where nothing else can be administered, but—ah-ha!"

For just then the drunken patient rolled partly over on a side, his cut and bloodstained garments thus coming more prominently into view.

"Knife and—cautery, too! Good! Couldn't be better, all things taken into consideration! Amen!"

At a sign from the sergeant, a couple of grinning cavalymen promptly fastened upon the patient, holding him prostrate on his stomach, despite his aimless struggles, while the doctor parted those slashed trousers to make a more critical examination of the wounds.

There was no difficulty in tracing the work of knife and powder, for in his earnestness Sergeant Clutterbuck had spared the use of neither, evidently acting on the rule of "kill or cure."

There was considerable inflammation, as might have been expected, but no such extreme swelling or discoloration as ought to have followed so severe a bite; and, satisfying himself on this score, the doctor answered the anxious look given him by the sergeant.

"You may congratulate yourself, sir, on your success as an amateur surgeon! The knife, the bleeding, the cautery, the liquor, all combined, sir, has surely wrought the good work!"

"Then—he is in no immediate danger, doctor?"

"No more than you are, sir," placidly declared the physician, deftly spreading a plaster and fastening it over the wound as well as possible.

This assurance vastly added to the mental comfort of at least the quartermaster, and when the doctor pronounced his work finished, Major Piety was able to assist himself in a slight degree when came the question of mounting for the road once more.

Even Le had not the "cheek" to ask for or expect an invitation to rest longer beneath that roof-tree, and, leaning far over the high pommel to ease his weight off that wound as much as might be, at the same time held from falling in his drunken dizziness by the trooper who mounted *en croupe*, the (more or less) gallant quartermaster headed away from the Applebee cabin.

Foot-Hill Frank watched until the little squad slowly vanished from view,

only then drawing a long, full and free breath, or seeming fairly conscious of the fact that light-footed, rosy-cheeked Nell Applebee had stolen forth to his side several minutes before.

But now—one swift look toward the cabin, then an arm swung about that trim waist, and lips pressed other ripe lips in a kiss of love.

Evidently Frank was in scant danger from Miss Watkins' great eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SNAKE THAT BIT THE MAJOR.

He who, right or wrongfully, laid claim to the name and title of Captain South, one of the notorious road-raiders whose recent exploits had fairly set on fire the surrounding country, caught sounds sufficient to warn him of the approach of an armed force which could only be the enemy.

He still held firm faith in the security of that covert, but took what further precautions lay in his power, quickly guarding against any alarm breaking from Speed Harness.

This done, the road-raider crouched close to the masked entrance, hands lightly resting on his weapons, waiting and listening, since eyesight was of scant avail just then.

That disguising grain-sack covered his smile as well as his face, but just the hint of a sardonic chuckle was born when Major Piety lifted the floodgates to turn loose his profanity against everything in general and Speed Harness in particular.

Cool dare-devil though he undeniably was, Captain South drew back a bit as the weighty quartermaster let his mountain of weary flesh subside, actually shutting out a portion of light as his broad beam-ends covered a goodly bit of that crack in the rock!

A particle or two of the gray dust dropped down before the road-raider, and as he looked again he saw what seemed to turn his years backward for the moment, and gave him too powerful a temptation to resist.

No sooner thought of than put into execution, without taking time to weigh the possible consequences, and so that terrible serpent was born!

A couple of long and sharp pins, held to imitate the print of rattler's fangs; an admirable imitation of the death-warning *skir-r-r!* A sharp and ruthless stab which buried both pins past their middle in that quivering rear, sending the wounded man howling and cursing off the rock, never for an instant doubting but that he had received his death-stroke from that venomous reptile!

A cruel jest, indeed!

Yet Captain South enjoyed it mightily, while his disguised fellows, who had followed his actions with breathless interest, fought hard to hold their risibles in subjection lest that brilliant jest be turned to gloomy earnest through betrayal of their hiding place.

But fortune smiled upon the road-raiders just then, and, as outward sounds told them how completely the enemy had been deceived, and how all other thoughts and cares were cast into shadow by the (supposed) necessity for saving that precious life through haste and heroic treatment, both master and men were ere long at liberty to give free vent to their amusement.

Captain South even ventured far enough from that retreat to glimpse the escort of troopers hurrying the groaning, frightened quartermaster down the long slope toward the point where their animals had been left, one of their number hurrying on ahead of all others to take horse and race for medical help from far-away Nicodemus.

It was not so very long after this—barely long enough, in fact, to make sure the enemy had taken horse and departure in hot haste—that Reckless Jack Haltern and Billy Poteet came back, grinning all over their faces, even yet

delighted with their recent bit of grim pleasantry.

Explanations were in order, then, and as the double-barreled joke was fully comprehended, laughter was prolonged, and a gayer trio rarely foregathered.

But then Captain South changed his tune, for the mysterious loss of the money-box, for full possession of which he had plotted and schemed so daringly, still troubled him most sorely.

"You didn't see anything of the boodle, Jack?" he asked, a hand on an arm of his confidant. "'Twasn't down yonder?"

"Not that I saw, captain, and I used my peepers, too."

"Of course! I was a fool to think it—I *didn't* think it, in fact, but—well, of course, there was just the ghost of a chance that the hounds had recovered the money-box and were hunting us for revenge alone."

"Well, judging from looks and sounds, old Pussy-middle got heap sight more'n he was looking for, anyway!" jested Reckless Jack.

"'Twas worth a week's pay just to see him jump and hear him howl, for a fact!" admitted the road-raider, though his own laugh lacked something of heartiness for all that. "But—curse the crooked luck, anyway!"

"And better luck next clatter, captain."

"I meant this to be the last time! I meant—but you know all that, pardner. Now—who's got the boodle, anyway? Was it stolen, or only lost among the rocks when the horses stampeded? And—what was it sent 'em off in such a terrible rush?"

With savage swiftness came these queries, but Billy Poteet held his whist while Jack Haltern merely shook his head helplessly.

All that had been gone over thoroughly time and time again since the strange overturning of their audacious plans last night.

A mystery to start with, and only growing deeper and more dense the worse it was probed!

Again Captain South was the one to change the subject, and at the same time he turned to re-enter that hidden den where Speed Harness was lying in bonds and hoodwink.

"We've got to shake that infernal hound, of course. If it wasn't for the bare name of the thing, I'd slit his throat and let it go at that!"

"Would it pay, boss?" gravely suggested Haltern.

"Will it be safe to do any less, though?" with a touch of sharp irritation in his voice. "If we hadn't let the boodle slip, 'twouldn't have mattered to let his clapper wag as it liked, for we'd be far out of its range before his poison could begin to work. But now—eh?"

"If we can't foolish him, reckon I can lie him down," coolly said the taller knave. "My face is the only one he's clapped peepers on, and I was laid out stiff when some masked coves jumped us both. See?"

"It might work, only—"

"Better the risk than killing in cold blood, captain," quickly and earnestly cut in the other road-raider. "It's either turn loose, or hold him captive until after we spell this nasty puzzle clean out!"

A brief silence, during which the chief of road-raiders seemed deep in thought; then Captain South again moved forward, entering the den and making a sign which resulted in Speed Harness being raised to his own feet once more.

The surrounding light was dim, yet sufficient to show one man to another, and as the hoodwink was pushed up above his eyes, Harness saw that disguised shape standing in front of him, looking grimly grotesque with that rude headdress.

"It's your turn now, fellow," spoke that deep-pitched voice, so utterly unlike that native to the present speaker.

"I kin wait, ef you're anyways pressed fer time, boss," humbly, whiningly observed the prisoner. "I never was much of a hog, an' right now I feel mighty sight less than—"

Captain South lightly smote those bearded lips and the captive instantly subsided.

"Only an idiot thinks he can play with fire and not burn his fingers, Speed Harness. You're more knave than ass, however, and so must have discounted the risks before taking service under those bummers in blue.

"By good rights, I'd ought to put a pill through your skull and let it go at that, but—I always *did* let my heart run away with my head, and I suppose I always will!"

Speed Harness parted his lips as though about to speak, but closed them again in silence, evidently yet in awe born of that former reproof.

"Well, what is it, fellow?" asked Captain South. "Out with it."

"Waal, boss, I was jest gwine to say as how—I hain't wuth wastin' a good ca'tridge onto—no, I plum hain't, now—noways!"

A subdued snicker came from one of those onlookers, but the untimely sound immediately died away as the chief lifted a hand in warning.

"Where did you spend last night?" demanded the inquisitor, sharply, as though in hopes of startling the truth out of the witness ere he could shape lie or evasion.

"Which?"

"Answer me; where did you spend last night, I say?"

"Oh! Jest over yender. Ole man Applebee done let me bunk to his shack, ye see, sir, bein' as I hedn't no better place fer to go. An' I try to pay my way, fa'r—fishin' an' shootin', most gin'ally."

A brief silence, during which those eyes scanned that weather-beaten face closely, but without detecting aught therein to reward the trouble taken.

"Well, as I hinted, I hold you more knave than fool, so just chalk down this bit of a warning in your memory-box, please.

"I'll let you off now easy, but another time—good-bye John! You shall be turned out in the cold, there to shift for yourself as best you may. So—blind him, lads!"

With swift dexterity Harness was hoodwinked again, then led forth from the den, turned and twisted around often enough to confuse a more steady brain than even he could boast, only permitted to halt when his disguised captors felt satisfied with the precautions already taken to keep secret that underground refuge.

While his feet and legs were being securely bound, Captain South once more warned the scout, speaking sharp and pointedly.

"When we go, fellow, you're at liberty to free yourself as quick as you like—or can! When loose, go your ways, but don't talk too much or too loudly. If you really wish to play even for all this, just raise a whisper for Captain North and his bully boys, then—guard your head if you know how!"

Five minutes later Speed Harness was left alone in bonds, to win free or perish, as fate should will, while his recent captors, no longer in disguise, were hurrying away through the rocks and bushes, each man seemingly acting upon his own hook, yet all making for the same quarter—the neighborhood of that enigmatical loss which so bothered Captain South and his particular henchman, Reckless Jack Haltern.

It really seemed a forlorn hope, for that ground had already been quartered by the keen-eyed losers, while nothing of the missing money-box had been seen along the line of flight marked by those shod hoofs.

Still, the road-rider could not abandon all hopes, and by the rapidly waning light of day he pressed his fruitless

quest, growing more savage and despondent with each fleeting minute of failure to find.

Others were equally hard at work, for the "boodle" was richly worth hunting for, in spite of the fact that, if seen by the boys in blue, the hunters would almost certainly be transformed into the hunted.

The sun sunk out of sight, the gray twilight deepened until night fairly took possession, effectually putting a stop to further search for the missing money-box.

Captain South squatted down upon a low rock, chin in palms and knees supporting elbows, as he stared into vacancy.

His reflections were dark and moody, while ever and anon a low but fervent curse came gratingly forth; curses on his foul luck, his folly in for even a moment permitting that little fortune to pass out of his own grip; but, above all else, curses deep and savage against the one who had so deftly cheated him out of his hardly-won wages!

Whom could it be?

There lay the puzzle which so far defied his most earnest efforts to solve!

If he could only form even the faintest, lightest, most remote guess at the truth, there would be some satisfaction in crowding the point; but, try as he might, all was mystery, all was a blank past his reading.

And thus time crept along while the road-raider brooded over his heavy loss, little thinking of the enemy who was creeping nigher, to finally leap forward, striking his victim down without sound or warning!

CHAPTER XVI.

SPEED HARNESS TURNS THE TABLES.

No prowling panther ever made surer leap upon dozing fawn than did this unheard enemy upon the back of Captain South as the latter sat moodily brooding over his recent loss.

Striking as he came, too, driving the surprised outlaw forward off the rock and upon his face, still further crushed out by the weight of a body which seemed all bone and muscle and tensely strung sinews just then.

Before the surprised man could rally even in part, his arms were twisted behind his back, there to be bound past all breaking away, while a bony set of fingers closed with grim significance about his throat, and a low, yet painfully distinct, voice came to his startled ears:

"Try to kick or squeal, blame ye, an' out goes yer light! I've got ye—got ye right whar I wants ye most, too!"

"Don't—I never—" panted the "under dog" as well as he could for that suffocating grip.

With a quick, powerful effort the captor turned his human prize over upon his back, squatting across his stomach and holding the cold muzzle of a revolver (taken from the road-raider's own belt) against his mouth as he grimly gave warning:

"Easy, I tell ye, critter! You done tuck your turn, back yender, an' this is my say-so! I like ye heap sight best livin', but I'll kill ye too dead fer skinnin' ruther than loose ye now!"

Words with the bark on, truly! And yet he who heard that grim warning could hardly doubt its perfect earnestness, for in spite of that dim and uncertain light he now recognized—Speed Harness!

"That's mighty what!" confirmed the mountain vagabond, reading aright that slight start and shiver. "I didn't say much when chin-music couldn't count wuth a cent, but now—every word weighs a ton, an' hits ye right whar ye live, too!"

"I don't—it's all a mistake!" the prisoner managed to pant, in spite of grip and gun. "Give me—half a show—"

"In a weenty shake. Fust, chaw on this: I'll drean your black heart of its last drap o' red licker ef ye try to break away or to yelp fer help. Play me white, an' I won't harm ye—jest yit! Now, will ye keep inside o' decent bounds, critter?"

"Yes. Let me—what does this vile outrage mean, anyway, sir? What have I done to merit—it's abominable, I tell you, sir!"

With passionate earnestness spoke the prisoner, yet keeping his voice under admirable control, thanks to that grim menace.

"Wuss then when you jumped me over yender, eh?"

"I never—it's all a mistake, man alive! Can't you see? Who and what do you take me for, anyway?"

"You done tole me you was Cap'n North, an' ef I wanted to—"

"I knew it—I felt dead sure 'twas all a clumsy mistake!" declared the under man, greatly relieved if his tones spoke true. "Why, my dear sir—hello! Surely I've seen you before this?"

"Waal, now, I want to know!"

"You're—surely I've seen you over at the Applebee place? They call you Speed—something—what is it, anyway?"

"Waal, 'tain't durn fool, anyway," drawled the mountain vagabond.

"Don't act so mightily like one, then! Why, man, all the country-side knows me—who I am, and what I am! And you—can't you see for yourself that you've stuck your foot in it—clean up to your knee, too!"

But Speed Harness merely gave a low, amused chuckle, in no wise shaken in either belief or determination. But then he said, grimly enough:

"I know you're the sport folks call Dean Maupin, back thar to Nicodemus, but I know a mighty sight wuss then that—I know you played Cap'n North, or Cap'n South, over yender, no longer ago then—"

"You're crazy, man!"

"Nuther crazy nur yit a durn fool," bluntly asserted the mountaineer. "I know what I do know, an' a part of it is jest like this:

"You done me all over dirt this day, an' owned up o' your own free will an' a'cord as how you was in the hold-up business."

"You lie—like a dog you lie!" harshly spoke the bound man, making a sudden effort to cast off that weight, but failing to more than shake his captor a bit.

Speed Harness tapped those uneasy lips with pistol-muzzle.

"Stiddy, critter! You're wuth heap sight mo' to me livin' then you kin fetch as cold meat, but ef I can't hev a full meal I'll take a lunch! Don't make me start a shingle; don't ye do it, now, pardner!"

"Would you murder me, you brute?"

"Tain't murder to shet off the wind of a wolf or a mad-dog, an' that's the class you trot in, critter," coolly retorted Harness, evidently quite at home when it came to bandying hot stuff.

"I tell you, sir, it's all an infamous mistake!" hotly persisted Dean Maupin, gambler and all-around sport of Nicodemus. "I know nothing whatever of your road-raiders and such; I'm an honest, reputable citizen, without a stain upon my past record, and if you—I'll have your life for this vile outrage, sir!"

"Ye say you will; raally, now?"

"I say I will, and I mean every word of it, too! I'll drain your black heart for this foul insult, and—"

"Whar'll Major Dix Piety come in at, fust, pardner?"

"I don't—what do you mean, anyway?"

"Business, chuck-up!" declared Speed Harness, with an abrupt change of both tone and manner. "Ef ye don't b'lieve it—listen!"

"Them soldier lads come to me an' axed me fer to help 'em run down the ornary critter as done jumped 'em last night an' stampeded with a powerful big boodle."

"What has all that to do with me, you infernal idiot?"

"Heap sight, I'm takin' it, pardner. Fer you're the critter I was hired to track down, an' I'm gwine fer to run ye right over thar to Fort Grant, whar—stiddy, you!"

Again Maupin strove to upset his captor, and once again failure was his only reward.

Having quelled that brief insurrection, Speed Harness spoke on:

"I'm gwine to help ye on yer own pegs now, critter, but don't let any fool notion run away with yer wits. I've gone to heap trouble to grup ye. I'm gwine to hold all fast ontel I'm turnin' ye over to the blue-coats at the Fort."

"I'll never go—never!"

"Oh, yes, you will," coolly asserted the mountaineer, rising to his feet and drawing Maupin after him, handling the lightweight with seeming ease. "An' ef you're half-way as smart as ye look in the face o' ye, Moppy, you'll go 'long like a baa-sheep. See?"

"Why should I go to Fort Grant, or any other place, at your bidding, for that matter?"

"Waal, it looks sort o' like this to me, pardner," deliberately said Harness, grip tightening upon that shoulder the while, "I've got ye foul, an' my say-so tops 'way over yours. I say you're gwine to the Fort, thar to be showed up afore Major Dix Piety, fer him to 'zamine an' 'cide ef you be the critter as foolished him out o' all that big boodle or not."

"Ef you kin prove a alibi, good fer you an' wuss fer me! Ef not—waal, I'll jest ax the major fer to add in my score 'g'inst you when he comes to pull pay out o' ye fer his score. See?"

"I've said my say, sir," surlily retorted the prisoner, letting his lower limbs relax and sinking to the ground again. "I'm not going to help rub the dirt in on my own self. Now—do your worst, curse you!"

A brief silence, then Speed Harness thrust the revolver back into his belt, stooping and fastening a firm grip upon his stubborn captive, giving a heave and toss which swung Dean Maupin fairly upon those muscular shoulders, at the same time saying, grimly:

"You're done gwine—dead or livin', you're gwine, critter! An' ef you kick or squeal too nasty, I'll kill or cure ye the shortest way!"

With long strides the mountain vagabond set off through the now gloomy night, picking his way through the rocks and bushes, seemingly gifted with eyes of an owl and powers of a pack-mule.

Dean Maupin struggled a bit, for his position was anything but a comfortable one, let alone the rough dog-trot into which his captor subsided after the first few yards, each and every step jolting him from crown to sole and all the way through.

"Stiddy, critter!" again warned this human pack-horse, his grip tightening on wrists and ankle as he pressed on through the night. "Them as ride must pay, ef not in one sort o' coin, then another! Jest now—ef ye'd rather work yer passage leg fashion, all ye want to do is to whisper what a pizen fool you've

"Oh, I'll even up for all this, you devil! I'll murder you a thousand times over for all—my arm!"

As though the pain he suffered was entirely too much for human endurance, the Nicodemus Sport cried out shrilly, his voice reaching far through the night.

With a savage oath, Speed Harness dashed ahead through the darkness, at the same time veering sharply to the right, as though he hoped thus to foil any foeman whose ears might have caught that wild appeal.

For right well he knew what the sound meant—a cry to guide friends to his rescue, rather than an appeal for mercy to his captor!

Again Dean Maupin cried out shrilly, like one tortured by that rough usage, and knowing now that he must take

prompt action if he hoped to retain his present prize, Speed Harness stopped short, swinging the struggling prisoner around and downward, gripping his throat with the left hand just in time to smother another wild screech.

"Quiet, cuss ye fer a squall-cat!" he harshly grated, crushing Dean Maupin lower as he himself knelt down in the gloom, revolver in hand and his eyes peering around in all quarters. "Ef ye done fetch ary of yer imps down this way, I'll slit yer wide from waist to thrapple!"

But no answering shouts came to their ears, and presently Speed Harness jerked Maupin to his feet, shoving him onward through the night, once more under way for his far-off destination. But then all at once a harsh challenge came from just ahead, out of the gloom:

"Steady, there! Hands up, or I'll blow ye through."

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN NORTH CHIPS IN.

From straight ahead came the harsh challenge, and as Speed Harness stopped on the instant he could just make out the phantom-like shape of the speaker.

At the same time his preternaturally keen sense of hearing warned him that still other foemen were afoot, and that he was nearly, if not quite, surrounded by them.

There was no time to wonder; little use in blaming himself for thus blundering straight into such a hornets' nest.

As by instinct the mountain vagabond knew that only swift and daring action could avail him aught, and without the loss of a single breath of time he took his long chances.

Giving his prisoner a shove and jerk which flung him rudely aside among those rocks, Harness ducked low down and leaped to the left, no sooner touching his feet than he gave another dive, just as Dean Maupin found breath sufficient to cry aloud:

"Stop him! Kill him! It's Captain South who is—down him!"

That savagely malignant cry seemed to awaken a round dozen other voices, shouts and yells, oaths and broken commands fairly filling the air for a brief space.

As he made his third erratic leap, meaning then to flatten as close as might be to earth and thus evade his enemies through noiseless skulking, Speed Harness found himself rushing squarely into the arms of one of those as yet unidentified foemen.

A startled ejaculation told that he was discovered, but ere the man could actually shout forth the tidings, the mountain vagabond ducked his head lower, plunging forward ram-like.

Struck fairly amidships, the fellow was doubled up and knocked far backward, too utterly breathless for even a curse of rage or gasp of agony.

Springing past the downfallen obstacle, Speed gave a fair illustration of his name by gliding swiftly away through the gloom, ready to fight if he had to, but longing simply to be left alone!

And then, guided by that fall over the loose stones and the splintering of bushes, the enemy came that way with a rush, pouncing upon the breathless fellow, while once again the hampered Sport from Nicodemus viciously cried aloud:

"Take him! Kill or capture, men, for it's—he's one of the infernal road-agents who—kill him!"

There was a right pretty little pile of struggling humanity built up over that luckless member, where each man pulled and tugged, kicked and struck with a will none the less hearty because it was all aimless, thanks to the darkness; but presently one of their number broke the spell by harshly commanding:

"Steady, all! Line up and see who's who!"

There was the snap of a match against rock, then a glow which became a glare of light as the master of ceremonies held

up a crumpled paper, by means of which their mistake was quickly recognized.

Rough-looking, tough-looking, but surely not the game most wanted, and once again that harsh voice made itself heard above the cries and curses of angry wonder.

"All eyes open, lads! Our man is—stop!" his voice ringing out still clearer as he both heard and saw something to guide action.

So far Dean Maupin had acted solely on impulse, too badly confused to think of aught save vengeance upon the knave who had subjected him to such harsh usage.

But now, as he saw how surely the rush had passed him by, all hands flocking to that one point, he inwardly cursed himself for not having better improved his time—for not stealing away through the darkness in silence rather than betraying his presence through denouncing Speed Harness.

He tried to make amends for that folly, but with arms helpless to fend or to balance, he blundered against a low rock, tripping and falling over it with noise sufficient to guide yonder keen eyes.

He scrambled to his feet and broke away, but in vain.

The chief of that squad was upon his track, and a dozen active leaps brought him within clutch, his harsh voice sounding again:

"Stop, you fool! Try to kick and I'll—ha! Who and what are you, tied up like this?"

"Don't—don't shoot!" panted the Nicodemus Sport, his muscles relaxing as he felt that savage clutch. "I'm not the one who—did you catch him, sir?"

"Catch what?"

"That demon—Captain North, or South—one of the road-agents who—he had me fast and swore he'd lift my scalp if—oh!"

That iron clutch twisted Maupin to earth, a foot planted heavily upon his back while its owner called forth, sharply:

"Scatter, and look for the other galoot, lads! If you jump him, take him, cold or hot. Take him, curse ye!"

But this was not to be, then and there, for with so much grace Speed Harness could have foiled double as many human hounds, thanks to his intimate acquaintance with all that region.

Hot and vigorous was the quest, but not so greatly prolonged.

He who appeared to be in sole command of this party, quickly grew convinced that further search was useless, and his signal-call was not long in fetching the lesser lights to the spot where he stood guard over the hampered Sport.

So far he had failed to pay the slightest attention to the pleas for freedom made by Dean Maupin, holding him under foot with brutal force; but now, as his fellows came back from that vain chase, the one in authority struck a match and held it low enough for the glow to reveal that flushed face, at first sight of which a vicious cry burst from his lips.

"You, is it? Got you—got you at last, ye devil!"

Foot gave place to hands, and the Nicodemus Sport was jerked upward only to be shaken as a dog might punish a rat.

In vain he protested against such brutal treatment, declaring himself a much-abused man, but by no means deserving such vile usage.

For sole reply, his captor, who appeared to be gifted with the bodily strength of a giant, shook him still more vigorously, grimly laughing his protests to scorn.

"I've wanted you ever since—but time enough for that when we get to safer quarters," he said, finally, abruptly cutting his own words short.

A gesture served to give his followers their cue, and then, half-carrying, half-dragging the hampered Sport from Nicodemus, the chief hurried away through the night.

This was becoming a bit less gloomy, thanks to the faint rays which heralded the rising moon, and ere they had covered many more rods, Dean Maupin made a far from reassuring discovery for the honest and reputable citizen he laid claim to being.

His captors, so far as he could now make out, wore masks of some sort of cloth, completely covering their faces!

That awkward journey was not a very extensive one, ending for the time being when the little company reached a secluded spot where a number of horses were tethered, watched over by a single herder.

"Any trouble, lad?" asked the chief curtly.

"Not a hooter, boss! Too durn quiet fer sleepin', even!"

"All right. A couple of you play keepin' case for a bit. If any one makes a sneak in on this little game—well, you'll pay costs!"

Evidently this person was accustomed to obedience, for not a word of objection was raised by the couple his finger singled out from the rest, while another word set in motion preparations for a fire.

Material for a blaze was anything but plenty in that region, but ere long sufficient stuff was gathered to make a small fire which would serve all purposes.

While these arrangements were being made, Dean Maupin was forced to "hold his hush" by that gruff captor, the hint for silence and patience being emphasized by point of a very business-looking knife.

As the little fire began to shed a mellow glow over the spot, however, the leader of that masked band broke this enforced silence, placing his prisoner where the light would strike his face fairly.

"Now, pardner, what have you to say for yourself?" was his blunt demand, drawing back a bit to leave Maupin standing alone.

"What do you want me to say?" sullenly. "I've already told you I'm white as a tree-born. I've already—but where's the use? You wouldn't listen then, and if you listen now—bah! Go on with your rat-killing, gentlemen! Maybe my turn'll come next!"

"Your turn has come right now, Maupin, since that's the name you prefer to sail under for just now."

"Who dares say it isn't my real and only name, then?"

"Go on, I say! Who tied you up like this? Why? When? What for? And who was that slippery fellow with you when we met up, back yonder?"

Swiftly poured forth this flood of questions, some of them awkward enough, but he who formed the target never flinched nor flushed, although it took an evident effort to steady his voice while beginning his reply.

That was brief enough, all things considered, and certainly sounded quite plausible, too.

Dean Maupin declared that he was out on a little hunting trip with a side-pardner of his—Jack Haltern, to be more definite.

They had been surprised and captured by road-agents, led by a masked man, who afterward admitted he was Captain South, and who, on finding poor plunder on their persons, swore that he'd have red if not yellow; that he'd kill Maupin unless he could buy his life.

"And right there you have it, sir; he let Jack go to town after the ransom, holding fast to me the while. And then, to make sure Haltern didn't play him a nasty trick, he shifted quarters with me in the dark, just as you jumped us, back yonder, sir."

The road-agent listened quietly enough, giving no signs one way or the other until Maupin ceased his explanation; but then he laughed, mockingly, flinging forth a brown hand in derision.

"Bah! I like a liar, but you suit me too mighty well, Maupin!"

"I've told you nothing but the naked truth, sir," earnestly vowed the prisoner. "I'm giving it to you straight as a string!"

"You're lying right off the reel, rather! Stop!" lifting his hand in a menacing gesture as the Sport would have spoken. "I've given you what you begged for; a fair chance to square yourself, and now—"

"I swear that all I've told you is gospel truth!"

"And I swear—I'm something of a liar myself!" mocked the outlaw. "Now, button that loose lip of yours until I ask you to let it go flutter again."

"If you don't know it already, I'll tell you just who and what I am: Captain North, road-raider, and toll-taker! Maybe you've heard tell of me, Mr. Maupin?"

"Of course, but—how have I injured you, sir?"

"How, do you ask?" with sudden fierceness entering his tones as he spoke on. "How have you injured me, is it? Like this, you cunning devil!"

"I got wind of the coming of Major Piety, quartermaster and paymaster, both. I knew that he'd have a he-old boodle with him, and swore I'd gobble that in or lose my light trying!"

"I found his name entered on the way-bill of the Boomerang stage, and of course I counted the pudding as mine! But—was it?"

"How should I know?" asked Maupin, his voice a bit more husky.

"Who but you, you cunning devil? You fooled me with the wrong scent, and sent me after the hearse, while you and your whelps jumped the major and took his pile! Now—cough it up, you cur, or I'll blow the whole top of your head off!" at the same time grasping throat with left hand, right shoving a revolver fairly into the Sport's face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ROAD RAIDER AND THE SPORT.

Death seemed staring the Nicodemus Sport fairly in the eyes, for he was totally helpless in that savage grasp, arms lound behind his back.

Many a strong-hearted man might well have lost nerve in such an emergency, but not so Dean Maupin.

Up to that moment he had seemed anything rather than a marvel of nerve or of hardihood, but now he looked squarely into those eyelets, his face pale enough, but surely not with the ashen hue of cowardice.

"You have spoken one truth, anyway," was his cold, even speech.

"What's that?"

"When you called yourself a liar. For you are a most infernal liar when you dare even hint that I am Captain South or a road-agent at all," sternly uttered the prisoner, never flinching an iota, although no man could more thoroughly realize how slight a hold he now had upon life.

A bit more pressure upon that trigger, and his light would go out, forever!

A brief silence, during which one could almost hear the beating of their strong hearts; then Captain North spoke again:

"I'd hate to kill you, for it's grit—pure grit you're showing, Maupin, right now."

"Give me half a show, and I'll amuse you still more thoroughly, old man," coolly said the Sport, evidently deeming it wisest to press that vein as far as might be. "Just give me—"

"I'm offering you a heap-sight better chance than I'd grant most fellows," quickly interrupted the outlaw leader. "Whack up fair on the boodle you took from the major, and we'll call it square. Come, now!"

"You're surely off your nut, captain; I never touched the boodle you speak of, nor even knew that any such prize was in this neighborhood. I told you—"

"A parcel of lies, too thin to hold water!" came the rude interruption. "I say you faked the stage-roll, over at Boomerang, to make me think the pay-

master was coming that way, in mufti.

"I say you played roots on the major and his escort, over at Blacktail Springs, running off his money-box with all the pile he'd brought so far to pay off the soldiers and outside scores!"

"I say this; I can prove all this; and now I'm giving you such another show as you'll never run up against betwixt now and the crack of doom!"

"And I positively deny all you have asserted, sir," coldly vowed Dean Maupin. "I am not the one you think, and hence—"

"Wait; this is the last call; remember, pardner. Will you make a fair divvy on that boodle?"

"How can I, when I never saw one penny of it all?" impatiently cried the bound Sport.

He surely must have known he was risking his life in so replying, but not the faintest trace of fear or of hesitation was perceptible.

A brief period of suspense, then Captain North lowered his revolver and grimly spoke in place of shooting:

"All right! Now curse you, listen to my bazoo!"

"You played me all over dirt when you monkeyed with the way-bill, and besides throwing me off the right scent, lost me one of my best and boldest lads."

"You tricked the major, and badly fooled his escort. They are just red-hot to catch you, and once in their grip—well, hanging will be the least you need expect, then!"

"I never harmed them, sir, and I repeat it all—"

But he did not, just then. Captain North struck him sharply on the lips, checking his speech and causing him to spit forth blood from broken skin and bruised gums.

"Shut-trap, you whelp! You've had plenty of show to talk to the point, and now—listen to what little more I've got to say, will you?"

"'Twas a rare bit of good luck that brought us together, to-night. I was looking for entirely different game, but now—come on!"

"Where to?"

"Wait and maybe you'll see for yourself, Captain South!"

A low whistle brought in the look-uts, who were questioned, but had nothing of interest to report. They had neither sighted nor heard any person, and were ready to make oath that none such had been skulking around those diggings.

Evidently realizing the folly of hunting further for the daring fellow who had broken through their lines, Captain North gave the word to get under motion once more, himself looking more particularly after his important prisoner.

With his own hands Captain North hoisted Dean Maupin into a saddle, binding him fast with the end of a trail-rope passing around middle, and then knotted to pomel in front and cantle in rear.

The free end he retained in his own hand when he swung himself into the saddle and squared for the road.

"Hop up behind the gentleman, lad," he gruffly uttered to the road-raider whose animal had thus been pre-empted. "See that he don't take a tip nor tumble, even if you have to do a snug bit of hugging to keep him right end uppermost!"

After this fashion, then, Dean Maupin was conveyed still further away from the scene of his capture, pleased that his life should be spared so far, but viewing the prospect ahead with anything save joy or pleasant anticipations.

Very few words were spoken during that night ride, the animals being kept at as rapid a pace as the nature of the ground traversed would permit.

It was a rugged route to follow, even by day, but both chief and satellites seemed thoroughly familiar with the course, no one asking or giving audible directions so far as that was concerned.

Captain North guarded his prisoner with jealous care, riding as close alongside as the natural obstacles would permit, but throughout all that journey—and it lasted for several hours—not once did the road-raider speak to the Sport.

Finally a halt was called, and a thick muffler was wound around the head of the Nicodemus Sport, effectually blinding him and preventing his keeping tab on their movements by noting the various landmarks and the relative positions they held, one to another.

For the better part of another hour the cavalcade pressed onward after this precaution was taken, but then, when a halt was called, it bade fair to prove a permanent one, at least so far as Dean Maupin was concerned.

He was freed from the saddle, placed upon his feet, Captain North laying his hand on shoulder as he spoke gruffly:

"Take a weenty walk, Captain South, unless you prefer being dragged."

"Oh, I'll walk, even if you do call me out of my name," coolly said the Sport, evidently determined to make the best of a bad bargain. "Which way, pray?"

"Use your hoofs and let your clapper rest, curse ye!" surlily growled the chief of road-agents, giving him a shove ahead.

Maupin was not required to walk very far, then his heels were kicked from beneath him, seating him on the ground with more speed than either grace or comfort.

Captain North removed the hoodwink, now that the use of eyesight could work no particular harm, and for a brief space Maupin winked and blinked, the bright glow hurting his eyes after so long confinement.

Captain North seemed willing enough to allow an inspection of those quarters, but noting this fact, Maupin controlled his natural curiosity lest some evil trap lay beneath that indulgence.

He looked toward his captor, but saw little to reward his eyes, for the road-raider was still masked, and all he could settle in his mind was one fact: Captain North was a tall, stalwart knave, evidently not yet past the prime of life.

"Well?" the prisoner asked, anxious to learn the worst as soon as might be.

"Will you make it well, pardner?" came the swift counter. "Shall I give you another chance for your life and liberty, even?"

Maupin shook his head gravely before answering:

"How can I, stranger, when you demand utter impossibilities? Your pretended chance is just no chance at all; and you ought to know that by this time without repetition on my part."

"You still stick to it, then?"

"Since it's the solid truth, sir, I've no option left me."

"So much the worse for you, Captain South!" turning his head to sharply summon a couple of his fellows, who quickly drew near that spot.

"I'll leave this gentleman in your especial care, lads," coldly said the outlaw chief, with a wave of his hand toward Dean Maupin. "Watch him by night and by day; don't let him out of your sight for a single moment during my absence."

"We'll make him reckon he'd better be a mouse in a row of cats, boss!" grinningly assured one of the elect.

"See that you do, or there'll be a heavy reckoning betwixt you and me," grimly commented Captain North, then turning more directly upon the captive, to add:

"A last word to you, sir. I'm leaving you under an armed guard, and at the first move you make toward escaping, they shall have final orders to kill you like they might a mad wolf!"

"I am going across to Fort Grant, where I hope to find Major Dix Piety. If not back yet, I'll wait until he comes, for I mean to make him a fair offer. Can you give a guess at my full meaning, pardner?"

"Why take the trouble?" with an admirably affected yawn. "If I'm to know, you'll divulge, easy enough."

"Real 'cute, I don't think! But have your little jokes, Captain South, for the time is coming—listen, you slippery devil!"

"I'm going to find Major Dix Piety and ask him how high he values you at. If he offers enough to make it worth while, I'll turn you over to him, to deal with as he sees fit."

"And if he declines to deal with you, sir?"

"Well, I'll still turn you over—to the worms!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A FAITHFUL COADJUTOR.

The one shot fired by Captain North as Speed Harness sprang away in erratic flight, reached other ears than those of hunted and hunters, causing Reckless Jack Haltern to whirl swiftly in that direction, choking back a startled cry that he might the better utilize his sense of hearing.

For some little time he had been wondering what had become of his friend and master, Dean Maupin, but fought back the uneasy feeling with the belief that the Nicodemus Sport had in a measure lost sense of time in his vain search for the missing money-box.

But then, remembering the understanding which was between them, and knowing the hour long since sped, Haltern quickened his own pace, looking for his running-mate far and wide.

He did not see fit to share his growing uneasiness with the lesser lights, and so wandered apart from the other members of the road-raiding band, and was alone when, from a considerable distance, he heard the shot and caught the confused sounds which so swiftly followed after.

As by instinct the faithful knave knew that his chief had fallen into sore trouble, and without a care for himself, Haltern pushed on in that direction as swiftly as he knew how, guided by ear rather than eye, since the moon had not yet fairly showed its round face in the east.

That confused uproar died away before Jack could win the spot where all excitement centered, and he was forced to slacken his pace in order to make sure he was not going astray.

This gave him time for cooler thought, and no doubt helped to preserve him from running into the clutches of the enemy.

Although still some distance away, he yet caught sight of the flare which Captain North made with match and newspaper, and brief-lived though that light was, Haltern made one startling discovery.

"Masked, by the holies!"

Up to that moment he had no other thought than that his friend must have fallen in with Major Piety and his armed escort, but now—

"That devil, Captain North, or I'm a liar!"

This totally unexpected discovery caused the desperado to show an increase of caution, while by no means lessening his resolve to save his chief or share his fate.

If still living, Dean Maupin was in no great danger of losing his life at those hands. If already slain—so much the more need of his keeping a cool head and free hands!

Jack Haltern had an abundance of time to weigh the situation and settle upon his wisest course during the search for Speed Harness which ensued.

It puzzled him not a little to understand just why that hot hunt was being made, unless it might be for himself, since many knew how intimate he was with the Sport from Nicodemus.

Still, it was no very difficult matter to keep out of the way of those searchers, where good cover was so abundant,

and Jack bided his time, yet little by little edging his way closer to where Captain North stood guard over his captive.

If there had been sufficient light to show just how matters stood in his front, Haltern almost certainly would have made a bold dash to rescue the Sport, but with the odds so heavily against him, and everything so obscure, he deemed it the part of wisdom to wait and watch.

His chance vanished when the road-raiders flocked at the signal from their chief, but one fact was now settled—Dean Maupin was alive, and as the little squad pushed on through the night with their captive, Jack Haltern followed on their track, doggedly resolved to free his friend or lose his life while trying his level best.

The faithful fellow was not far distant when Captain North caused a fire to be kindled, that he might the better question his prisoner, but the lookouts prevented Haltern from stealing much closer, and he knew that any attempt at rescue now would only result in the loss of his own life, without in the least helping his chieftain.

And so, grimly determined, Reckless Jack waited and watched until the party took to horse, and then followed after, aided now by the light of the rising moon.

Through every crook and turn, sure as blooded hound, the man afoot dogged those on horseback, skulking here where the light showed too clearly, creeping almost on his stomach until friendly shadows were won, then running at speed to make up for time thus lost.

Not once did he lose the track, but sure as fate itself, he hunted the road-raiders home, only relaxing his efforts when he saw that this second halt was clearly meant to be permanent.

He saw the horses freed from their equipage, as though no further road-work was ahead for them, and then he looked about himself to prepare for what must come.

After placing his captive under special guard, Captain North turned away to complete his brief preparations for rying out his threats.

He took time to eat a few morsels of cold meat and bread-stuff, while his horse was being prepared for the road, together with those of his men, for whom he had more work on hand.

Jack Haltern watched these movements from his snug covert up among those rocks and bushes, hardly knowing whether to curse or to rejoice.

"If they leave the captain, good! If not—well, somebody's going to get hurt—and hurt mighty bad, too!"

While grimly muttering thus, the bold but faithful fellow looked to his revolvers, making sure they were in good condition for hot work and deadly; but, fortunately for all concerned, no doubt, that desperate action was not made necessary.

Captain North took horse and rode off through the night, followed by all of his men save those elected as guards over the prisoner, and not until then could Jack Haltern be said to draw a free, full breath.

Where only himself was concerned, a more reckless dare-devil never trod the footstool; but now it was different.

His fierce love for his chief was the redeeming point in that wild and lawless nature. If Dean Maupin had been free to fight and to fend, Jack would have rushed to the fray with reckless mirth, knowing right well that he would have a second in that master; but now—in bonds, helpless in the grip of the enemy, unable to defend himself, even—no!

Waiting with what patience he could summon until the sound of horses hoofs had died out in the distance, and it became tolerably certain that neither Captain North nor any of his road-raiders were likely to turn back for aught overlooked or forgotten, Jack Haltern crept out from his snug covert and began

scouting around the place, his prime object being to rescue from captivity of his friend and master, Dean Maupin, or Captain South.

In their determination to carry out the grim commands of their leader, the chosen guards bound Maupin snugly with back propped against the gnarled trunk of a tree, at the same time bidding him keep well in mind the orders under which they were acting.

"You done hear'n what-all the boss said, critter; to blow ye through ef so be ye tried to kick rusty! We'd jest love to lay ye out too cold fer skinnin', so—sabe?"

With this significant reminder as to what might be expected in case he offered trouble, the brace of knaves fell back nearer the pile of coals, which gave them both light and warmth, one producing a greasy and worn deck of cards as being the best anti-somnolent.

Jack Haltern saw them engaged at play, and creeping around until he had that tree-trunk between himself and the guards, he little by little stole closer to his friend, making no sound loud enough to attract Maupin's notice, much less that of the gamblers yonder.

Then, barely length of arm away, Jack gave a low signal which he knew right well would be instantly recognized by the Sport.

Maupin gave a slight start of glad amaze, but neither of the gamesters glanced that way, and Haltern softly breathed the warning:

"Easy, Cap! It's Jack, here to help you or share your lot. Now—I reckon we can make the raffle if—you're not hurt? Not crippled up?"

"No. Cut me free, and I'll prove it—on those curs!"

"Easy Cap! I could shoot, but the noise might fetch too big a pile down a-top of us! So—say you'll do as I say, first, pardner!"

"All right. I promise."

"Good enough! Steady, now!"

With keen-edged knife it was no difficult matter for Reckless Jack to sever those bonds, leaving his chief at liberty, yet cautioning him against any sudden movement which might cause those severed coils to fall completely away.

"Wait until you see me show my face at yon' bush just back of the fellows, boss," swiftly whispered the rescuer, as his work in that quarter was done. "Ask one of 'em to step over here, to give you a sup o' water or some such. If only one comes, I'll wait until you grab him. If both start, or neither—well, I'll jump 'em from behind, and do the best I know how!"

Without waiting for any improvement to be suggested, Haltern stole back the way he came, and five minutes later Maupin saw his head and broad shoulders show near the indicated shrub.

Captain South started to give the agreed-upon signal, but it was never completed, for just then one of the gamesters gave an ugly oath, flinging cards into the face of his mate as he made the charge of foul play.

In an instant both men were upon their feet, reaching for weapons, either in bluster or savage earnest; but Reckless Jack waited not to see which.

Afraid lest one or the other should sight him or drop to the fact that their charge was free from bonds, Haltern broke cover with a grim cry, striking swift and sure, felling one of the outlaws as though smitten with a thunder-bolt, then closing with his mate ere a blow could be turned his way.

The two men fell heavily, Haltern on top, just as Maupin sprung to his feet and rushed that way, savagely crying out:

"Kill him! Kill the infernal whelp, pardner!"

Reckless Jack added a swift stroke with clubbed gun to that heavy fall, then raised up just in time to check his chief with hand and word:

"Easy, Cap! No killing, for—hold hard, I tell you, man!"

"What better do they deserve?" viciously cried the other, his usually handsome face now actually repulsive through evil passions.

"Not a blame bit, if you put it that way, boss," came the quick reply. "But sometimes a joke cuts deeper than a blow, and so—I ask it as a personal favor, Maupin."

The Sport fell back, sullenly, while Haltern immediately resumed full charge, giving a brief grunt of satisfaction as he found both men without material injury, although still senseless from his strokes.

A few terse words told Maupin what sort of joke was intended, and after a bit of surliness he fell in with that grim humor, assisting to bind the two guards to the tree so lately ornamented by himself, then scrawling a few words on a blank leaf torn from his notebook.

This he pinned to the breast of one of his recent guards, laughing a bit as that varlet cursed impotently.

"If Captain North shouldn't catch sight of this first-off, my dear boy," mocked Maupin, as he affectionately chucked the knave under the chin, "please call his eyes this way. It's important—very important!"

Reckless Jack chuckled a bit as he read those words—signed Dean Maupin, in bold characters, and running thus:

"I give you back two for one, Captain North. If that is not entirely satisfactory, come to Nicodemus, and I pledge my honor to settle all charges—in hot lead and cold steel!"

Leaving the now-thoroughly conscious road-raiders in bonds, the two pards turned away, mounting the horses which Reckless Jack had found and saddled, facing toward Nicodemus.

CHAPTER XX.

FOOT-HILLS FRANK ON GUARD.

For some little time after leaving the rendezvous where Reckless Jack had prepared such a disagreeable surprise for Captain North of the Road Raiders, but little passed between the two pards save brief explanations as to recent events.

But then, after a number of miles had been put behind them, and both felt that no further danger was to be apprehended from that quarter, Dean Maupin once more opened the subject which had never for more than a few moments at a time left his mind since the mishap—the strangely missing money-box.

No, Haltern had failed to find it or any traces of it; and yet—

"I've been doing right smart puzzling over it, ever since," slowly added the taller knave, as they rode on side by side.

"If thinking and puzzling would only do the work."

"Who's to know it won't at least help out, though?"

"You mean something; what is it, Jack?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe a right smart heap. You know how it come to pass. If the boodle was shaken off when our nags broke away in a stampede, wouldn't we have found it since?"

"It really seems so, and yet—the fact remains that we didn't!" gloomily muttered the Nicodemus Sport.

"Well, as I said before, maybe I'm a fool for feeling that way, but—if I was put on Bible-oath, pard, right now, I'd say this: If Speed Harness didn't grip that boodle, then Foot-Hills Frank surely must!"

Reckless Jack spoke earnestly enough, but Maupin gave a short, half-sneering laugh before retorting:

"Oh, you're wild, man! Or would be, if 'twasn't pure jealousy because Foot-Hill has the inside track of you with the fair Nell Applebee!"

"That's all right," with quiet doggedness in his tones. "I'm not ashamed of it. I love that girl harder'n a buckin' mule can kick. I hate Frank Fitch just

as hard, but I wouldn't lie against him on that account. I say it over: I believe one or the other of those men has got hold of the missing money-box!"

"If I really thought so—"

"Think it all over as I've been doing, pard, and see how mighty natural 'twill look in that sort of light," suggested Haltern, quietly.

"That fire was further from town than from the Applebee shack. Both Fitch and Harness are mighty fond of the hills—you know that! I more than half believe they are working against us—trying to ferret out just who and what the Road Raiders are."

"It may be, and yet—"

"Well, it's worth bearing in mind, all the same. If I'm all wrong, we're nothing out but our time, and that's being wasted as it is."

This new suggestion as to a possible solution of the puzzling enigma seemed to busy Maupin's brain for the next hour, and very few words passed between the pards during that length of time.

Then, just as the gray streaks in the east proclaimed the birth of a new day, Jack Haltern reined up his horse, speaking tersely:

"Which way now, pardner? If to town, we can ride further; if over to the Applebee shack—"

The Sport lifted his head and glanced quickly around them, seemingly at a moment's loss to know just whither they had wandered during his mental study; but then he spoke:

"Why should we bother the Applebee shack, Jack? What good—or, can't you last longer without another squint at the girl?"

"I was thinking of Speed Harness, sir, but if you don't care—"

"The devil! I'd clean forgotten how—come on, then!" more naturally spoke the Road Raider, dismounting and leaving his horse to roam at will for the time being.

And so, when the rising sun cast its yellow rays over that portion of the mountain, the two pards were gazing down upon the Applebee cabin from the upper bench, Haltern grimly replying to some quip from the lips of the Nicodemus Sport:

"I'm not denying that I'm jealous, pardner. I just worship that little woman, and I know she might make a heap sight better man out of me if she only would!"

"I was thinking of Speed Harness, sir, if she hadn't the bad taste to prefer another, you mean?"

"Something that way—Satan blow slack lime up his britches?"

"Amen to all that—and as much more!" heartily seconded Maupin.

"You may try to turn it into a joke, pardner," gloomily added the stalwart road-agent, staring fixedly at the mountain cabin which gave shelter to the object of his passions. "It's dead earnest to me, though!"

"You are hard hit, for a fact, Jacky, boy!"

"So terribly hard hit that—listen, will you? I love that girl so madly that I'll win and wear her, if I have to kill Frank Fitch! I'll have her for my own, though I have to wade in blood over my boots!"

How much further the love-lorn outlaw might have gone can only be surmised, for just then Maupin gripped an arm with vicious force, sharply snarling the while:

"Look! Isn't that—'tis the cur, by blazes!"

He pointed toward the cabin, in front of which just then showed the slouching figure of a single man—past all doubting the figure of Speed Harness, who had so effectually turned the tables upon the speaker the evening before.

Even as Jack Haltern looked that way, the fellow vanished, stepping back as though to re-enter the cabin, from whose front door he had, seemingly, just emerged.

"Who was it?" asked the taller knave quickly. "Not Foot-Hills?"

"Didn't you see? No! Speed Harness, who—could he have glimpsed us up here, I wonder?"

Both men drew back a trifle at this, yet still crouching where they could command a fair view of the little building, although their location denied them a view of the front entrance.

A thin blue curl of smoke rose lazily from the stone chimney, showing that the household was fairly astir, no doubt making preparations for the morning meal; but not a sound came as far as that bench.

After the passage of five or six minutes without aught occurring to break that silence, Jack Haltern muttered:

"Suppose I go down and shake 'em up, pardner?"

"What use? If that fellow caught the drop on you—and what's to hinder just that?"

"Well, I'll run the risk if you say the word."

"Quiet, hot-head! Of course he's got it in for you, after the way you took him in out of the wet yesterday. I can't afford to lose you, just yet, Jack!"

Haltern gave a growl, half surly, half pleased at this, but ere he could say more another figure came within their field of vision.

As had the other, this shape came from the front of the cabin, and was instantly recognized by both men, as was proven by the name which issued from two pair of lips:

"Foot-Hills Frank!"

It was indeed that worthy, who leisurely moved into full view of the knaves on yonder bench, Winchester lying in the hollow of his left arm, right hand easily covering lock and trigger, as his keen gaze leisurely roved over the prospect, both front and to either side.

Haltern caught his breath sharply at sight of the rival whom he hated so intensely, but those steel-like fingers gripped his arm with a power which could not be denied, and a low voice sounded in his ear:

"Careful, Jack! You feel like killing, but—not until we've found out who's got the boodle, remember."

"I'd give half my life for a fair chance at him, though!" huskily muttered the stalwart road agent, hands tightly clenched and every sinew stiffened by hatred and jealousy.

For several minutes Foot-Hills Frank kept slowly in motion, looking around like one standing guard over some highly prized treasure, his every motion jealously watched from the bench above; but then, like one just become aware of their vicinity, the Fancy Sport faced their way, his Winchester turning more to the front as he called forth, sharply:

"I reckon you've lost your way, gentlemen! Better pick it up again before you make a worse mistake; don't you reckon?"

Maupin shrunk back a bit, but not so Jack Haltern. Stung by jealousy such as only a powerful nature can feel, he rose up into full sight, paying no heed to that menacing repeater, as he made a vicious show of teeth.

"And who in blazes are you, to offer your betters advice?"

"Are you really anxious to know, dear fellow?" mocked the Fancy Sport, but with twin spots of color darkening his smooth-shaven cheeks the while. "Faith, then, I had an idea you and I had rubbed up together once or twice ere this bright morn!"

"If I ever do rub up against you—"

"I'll have a bigger laundry bill to pay, of course!"

"Easy, gentlemen, both!" cried Maupin, in hasty warning, as he, likewise, rose into fair view upon the edge of the long bench of mingled stone and dirt. "This isn't the time or place for quarreling like a brace of wet-nosed urchins!"

"You, too, Mr. Maupin? Quite a crowd of you, in fact! But as for any

quarreling, rest easy, my dear sir. I never did fancy a mixed mess, and when I do quarrel, I pick my partner."

"You can sling words lively enough, Frank Fitch, but when it comes down to bedrock—"

"I talk right along a chalk-mark—this way!" sternly cut in the Fancy Sport, with complete change of tones. "You neither of you can have any honest business in this quarter, so—march!"

"What!"

"Just that, gentlemen. Your room is far better than your company, and so I repeat: Make tracks out of this while you are able!"

"Maybe you think you can make us tramp, Frank Fitch!"

"Well, if you turn stubborn I wouldn't mind trying my hand at it, anyway," came the cool retort.

Jack Haltern gave an ugly snarl, but ere he could make an actual move, a harsh challenge rung forth from one end of that level bench:

"Stiddy, the pa'r o' ye! Han's up, or I'll blow ye clean through!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A MATCH AT FISTICUFFS.

Keeping time with his challenge, Speed Harness stepped out into fair view, his Winchester catching the drop as he came.

Two pair of eyes flashed that way, and two men saw how completely their lives were held at the mercy of this mountain vagabond.

Foot-Hills Frank showed no surprise at this coup, his own repeater moving a bit more to the front even as he cried out, sharply:

"Steady, Speed! Don't shoot without they try to jump you; I can look after myself, thanks!"

"That's all right, but—stiddy, thar! Better eetchin' fingers than empty skulls!"

The two surprised knaves saw it all, now, and both faces showed how thoroughly disgusted they were at having fallen into such a simple trap.

Past doubting Speed Harness had glimpsed them during the half-score seconds he remained out in front of yonder cabin, and when he turned back it was to hastily consult with the Fancy Sport.

Fitch took his place, holding eyes and attention of the men there on the bench, while Harness crept out and away, covered by the cabin itself until he reached yonder rocks, after which it was no difficult task for a mountaineer of his skill to win a place on their level, then chipping in just in time to save Foot-Hills Frank from worse.

Contrary to the usual thing, Dean Maupin was by far the coolest and clearest-sighted of the twain, just now, and as he saw how heavily they were handicapped in case the enemy should see fit to press their advantage to the limit, he gave a low, warning hiss, then muttered:

"Make the best of it, Jack! We can't—wait and watch, pard!"

But that was rather too much to demand or expect of one like the taller member, whose fierce jealousy told him the girl both loved was even then watching matters, if not actually gloating over his utter discomfiture; and with a vicious snarl he burst forth with:

"You cur! I took you for drunk or gone crazy, first off, but now—shoot, the pair o' ye! If ye don't lay me out cold, I'll make ye chew dirt even yet!"

Foot-Hills Frank showed cool as the other was hot, and called out to the rifleman on the bench beyond:

"Hold your fire, Speed, unless they try to jump you. I mean it; dead square, too! I can fend for myself, and—look here, Jack Haltern!"

"Oh, I say, Fitch!" impatiently cut in Maupin, with an off-hand gesture. "Aren't you trying to run things a bit too high-and-mighty, now?"

"Don't make me run them into the ground, Mr. Maupin."

"Give us even half a show, and I'll ram-jam you there!" savagely menaced Reckless Jack, plainly on fire with rage, yet still wise enough to realize the worse than folly of charging upon death itself.

For that was what a rush would amount to, between the Winchester in front and that upon the flank. Either man could—and surely would—drop him in his tracks before he could make a second leap at his rival.

"Don't ye trust him, boss!" cried Speed Harness, in swift warning. "He's wuss p'izen then a he-ole rattler in shed-din' time, an' ef ye give ary one half a shake—"

"Listen to the dry-nuss scolding his wet-nosed kid!" coarsely mocked Haltern, laughing harshly as he stood defiantly between those rifles, a target which plainly invited a shot.

But Foot-Hills Frank had marked out his own course, and was not to be turned aside by scoffs or taunts.

"You heard me, Harness? I mean just that; nothing more, nothing less. Play to your own hand, and let me attend to my little game."

"All right, sir, an' I won't chip in so long's it's man to man. But ef they think to double-bank you—that's killin'!"

Jack Haltern broke into a fierce laugh at that, making a gesture of bitter scorn as he cried out in turn:

"Bah! Talk's cheap, but if you're even the ghost of a man, Frank Fitch, meet me on the square as man to man! I dare—double-dare you!"

"Keep your linen on, Mr. Haltern," coolly retorted the Fancy Sport, but at the same time laying his Winchester aside, barrel resting against a rock, then advancing a pace or two before adding:

"That leaves us on a common footing, so far as tools are concerned. Now, say your say out. I say that I'm your master at one and all games—unless it be playing dirt on sleepy travelers!"

"What do you mean by that fling, curse ye?"

"Nothing, unless the shoe fits you, Jack. But this much I do mean: I can do you up at your best hold, from powder and steel to naked hands."

"You're a liar by the watch!" fierce cried the desperado, paying no attention to the swift remonstrance given by his friend.

He would have sprung down that steep in mad fury, only for the grip which Dean Maupin fastened upon his arm, jerking the hot-head back and making himself heard at the same time.

"Steady, both of ye! I'll have no shooting or killing! If you must clapper-claw, do it white fashion, man to man!"

"Make it fo'-handed, boss!" suggested Speed Harness, his bronzed visage wrinkling with a broadening grin at the idea. "I'll play grizzly b'ar-with ye, Maupin, for the rags we stan' in, winner to take all an' loser to hunt a fig tree or punkin vine!"

Whether or no the mountain vagabond was in earnest, or merely turning a more serious matter into a rude jest, his interference worked one change: It covered Foot-Hills Frank's quick yet cool advance up to the bench, where he immediately addressed Jack Haltern:

"I'd hate to cheat the hangman, but if nothing less will fill the bill, Sir, pull your tools and get down to solid business!"

Again Dean Maupin interposed, eyes fairly on fire as they caught and briefly held the angry orbs of his henchman.

"Fight it out with naked fists if you like, gentlemen, but let what may come, I swear to kill the man who even tries to pull a gun or flash a knife! Now—take your choice!"

There was a curious change in the voice and demeanor of Reckless Jack, plainly the work of that flaming look, but there was naught of fear or shrinking as he spoke again:

"I'm ready to fight it out on that line, if we can't have a better one; but—a

snarling cur never bites, and that's—Frank Fitch!"

"We'll take your opinion on that point after a bit, Mr. Haltern, coolly retorted the Fancy Sport, loosening the buckle of his belt as he stepped back a bit nearer his guard, who was at the same time advancing, Winchester in one hand and revolver in the other. "Peel yourself, Jacky, and I'll paint you all over in spots—the stripes may come later!"

Instead of retorting in words, Haltern showed teeth in a savage grin, like some wild beast who sees a choice morsel coming just within his reach.

Dean Maupin was muttering something by way of caution, but the big fellow would have none of it, just then.

"I'll eat him up! I'll pound that pretty face until—Satan couldn't recognize his pet when I'm through with him!"

Another name was clearly at his lips, but Haltern choked it back and made the substitution, flinging aside his outer garments and stepping toward his rival, eager for the match at fisticuffs.

Foot-Hills Frank was no whit behind him, neither man waiting for idle chatter anent rules and regulations, giving full vent to their hot hatred, coming to close quarters without delay.

For a minute or so 'twas hit and parry, dodge and duck, each man betraying considerable knowledge of self-defense; but mad fury was blinding the stalwart road-raider so soon, and at the first opening Foot-Hills Frank shot in his right, followed swift as thought by his left, both strokes counting smartly.

Good man though he undeniably was, Jack Haltern evidently was overmatched so far as pure science was concerned, while no man living knew better how to press an advantage once won than the Fancy Sport.

Crowding closer as that head went back from the double stroke, Foot-Hills Frank shot in blow after blow, each one driving the tall fellow a bit further back, blood beginning to mark even his toughened face.

"Cur, is it?" mocked the Fancy Sport, as he struck swift and hard. "Pound my pretty face, will ye? How do you—like it—anyway?"

"Close with him, Jack!" cried Maupin, pale as a corpse, but with eyes fairly ablaze, as he saw his mate slowly but surely losing ground.

"You shet, cuss ye!" growled back Speed Harness, keenly watchful of his principal's interests. "Shet up or I'll step on your tongue, Moppy!"

Haltern tried his best, but Foot-Hills Frank was pitiless, now, crowding the fight like one eager to finish it off-hand, yet keeping cool head and perfectly clear wits.

Time and again Haltern strove to close, but those iron-like fists kept driving his head backward and forcing his body to follow, while his half-wild blows were either dodged or warded neatly off.

To do this neatly Fitch was forced to strike half-arm blows after the first double, and while each tap left its sign, they could not quite "knock out" the recipient.

The tall fellow was fairly wild with baffled fury, for he fancied that pretty Nell Applebee was watching his shameful defeat; and that thought gave him strength to make a little way against his active adversary, even though he was now well-nigh blinded by those fists.

Then—as will so often happen—a trifle seemed to turn the scale!

Foot-Hills Frank slipped a bit on a loose stone, and that threw him a little off-balance, just as Haltern made his rush.

"Now you have got him, Jack!" fairly yelled Maupin, as he saw those long and muscular arms close around the Fancy Sport. "Down him! Pound the very life out of him! Now—now, I tell ye, man!"

The rivals stood breast to breast, close locked, swaying from side to side, turn-

ing dizzily around as they fought with savage fury.

That could not last long in nature, but once again it was pure luck that turned the scale against one and in favor of the other.

This time Haltern tripped on a stone, and with a hoarse roar he was borne backward, Fitch adding his own weight to that heavy fall.

One hand flew out to save its owner, and as fingers closed around a heavy fragment of rock, Fitch swung it upward, fiercely crying out:

"Beg, you crooked whelp! Beg, or I'll mash in your face!"

CHAPTER XXII.

FOOT-HILLS FRANK GIVES WARNING.

That trip and fall left Reckless Jack in poor case for carrying on the fight which he had fully intended making to the very death.

The shock itself was nearly sufficient to put him to sleep, intensified as that was by the addition of his rival's whole weight.

The road-raider lay quivering beneath his enemy, gasping for bare breath, while Foot-Hills Frank, wild with hatred, gripped that ugly weapon and held it menacingly above that fist-marred face.

The blow fell almost as heavily upon Dean Maupin as it did upon his henchman, Jack Haltern, for he held superb confidence in the muscular powers of the taller knave, having seen them repeatedly pass the test in days gone by.

As he saw Haltern fall underneath, a snarling cry of vicious rage and disappointment burst through his thin lips, and very possibly he might have tried to lend a helping hand, only for the prompt action of Speed Harness.

Dropping his Winchester to grab the little gambler with that hand and jerk him back, the mountain vagabond thrust the muzzle of a revolver into Maupin's face, sharply crying out in grim warning:

"Don't ye—don't ye burn yer fingers, critter! Chip in an' I'll make a plum sifter out o' ye—I will so!"

"If he kills Jack—"

"Good redden o' wuss truck, then! But he won't—that's right, pardner! Make him beg—make him play hog ketched under a gate!"

During those few swift-fleeting seconds Foot-Hills Frank had improved his own position, now squatting astride his fallen enemy, one heavy knee planted in elbow-crook, pinning Haltern fast to the ground and rendering him practically helpless.

Left hand was gripping throat, its mate holding rock above that bruised and bleeding face in readiness to carry out that stern threat.

"Beg, you cur!" the victor repeated, glaring down into those blood-shot eyes, grip on throat tightening as Reckless Jack began to struggle, rallying in part from that stunning fall.

"Beg for mercy, and I'll let ye run free to meet the hangman!" repeated Fitch, looking in savage earnest. "Beg, I say, or—I'll mash that pretty face so Satan couldn't recognize his pet disciple!"

But Reckless Jack showed no signs of fear or of quailing, and though he surely must have realized how utterly defenseless he now was, he managed to free his throat sufficiently to hoarsely growl:

"Never—to you! Kill me—you can kill, but—you can't whip—one side of—me!"

"Slam it to him, boss!" cried Speed Harness, his gun holding Dean Maupin at bay, but his eyes contriving to take in that glad spectacle all the same. "Make him squeal or—slam it to him, bless ye, boy!"

For the space which might be covered by a single breath it really seemed as though Foot-Hills Frank was about to follow that sanguinary advice.

That jagged rock quivered above the unguarded face, and—who knows—it might have fallen with sickening, even deadly force, had the overthrown gladiator showed signs of fear, just then!

Instead, Jack Haltern fearlessly glared back defiance, again hoarsely panting:

"Kill—can't whip!"

At that the stone fell, but 'twas far over the edge of that bench, cast away as though the victor wished to flee far from brutal temptation; but there was a laugh in place of threat in the voice which spoke next:

"You're a gritty rascal, Jack! If you had me where I now have you, what would be my fate?"

"I'd kill you—like a dog—as you are!" savagely panted the road-raider as Fitch slackened grip on his throat.

"And I—bid you live and outrun the hangman if you can!" lightly retorted the Fancy Sport, drawing back and springing to his feet.

"Good—Lawd!" exploded Speed Harness, in utter disgust at such quixotic action. "Ef he had you foul, boss—"

"Don't I know all that, though?" coolly cut in the victor in that little match at fisticuffs, stepping back a couple of paces as Haltern dizzily staggered to his feet. "If our lots were reversed, I know he would pound me to a jelly—but I am a gentleman, while you," with a mock blow toward his crestfallen rival, "are—Jack Haltern!"

The person named gave a surly growl at this taunt, but he was hardly in condition to renew the struggle, just then, and had to swallow the bitter potion.

Dean Maupin, who had been so neatly held "on the square" by Speed Harness, coldly spoke up in place of his friend:

"It's poor proof of gentility, sir, to spit on a man when he's down. Only for a bit of bad luck, Jack would have bested you—and no person better realizes that than—Mr. Fitch himself!"

"So you put it, Mr. Maupin," with a cool glance and nod that way, then turning once more squarely toward his defeated rival. "A last word with you, Jack Haltern."

"Curses cover you from top to toe!" sullenly growled the bruised champion, brushing his hand over his nearly blinded eyes as he spoke further: "I'll even up with you, yet; don't you forget it, either, Frank Fitch!"

"I'm talking, please," sharply cut in the Fancy Sport, one finger raising to quiver in front of that fist-scarred visage. "I've let you off mighty cheaply this time, Jack Haltern, but I'll kill you the next time I catch you skulking 'round these premises! Now—pull your freight, and pull it in a hurry, too, old man!"

Dean Maupin stepped forward as though to lend his friend a helping hand, but stopped quickly enough as he caught the significant click of a pistol, turning to see Speed Harness once more holding the drop.

"What do you mean, you—turn that gun, or I'll—"

"Stiddy be jerks, most noble grand!" grimly cut in the vagabond, muzzle following its mark as Maupin shifted place. "Now the big fellers hev hed thar little dance, I reckon it's—your turn, Captain South."

Sharp and menacing came the final words, but if he counted on taking his man off-guard, Speed Harness was fated to be disappointed.

Instead of flinching or showing other signs of confusion or fear, the Nicodemus Sport stared into that stern face for a second or two, then burst into a sneering laugh.

"What, you blessed lunatic! Is that fool' bee still buzzing in your bonnet? Captain South? Bah! You've turned crazy, man!"

"So you said afore, critter, but what I know I do know, and so I tell ye solid—lift them flappers, an' lift 'em empty!"

"Steady, Speed!" just then interfered Foot-Hills Frank, with a placating gesture.

ure as he moved a bit nearer both men. "What is it, anyway?"

"Some crazy notion of his about my being—ridiculous!"

"If you're only ridiculous, Mr. Maupin, you can count yourself let off mighty easily," chaffed the Fancy Sport, then again speaking to the man with the drop: "I ask *you*, Harness, what is it, now?"

"I kin take my davy that durn critter played Captain South onto me, jest the day gone by!" grimly charged Harness. "An' now—waal, I'm gwine fer to play even-up with him—I be!"

"He lies—under a misapprehension, sir," more coolly declared the gambler, looking toward the Fancy Sport as the one reasonable opponent. "If you are mad enough to back him up—"

"I need no backin', blame ye!" surlily cut in Speed Harness. "I say you're the dirty whelp as played me dirt yesterday, an' good as 'fessed up as how you was Cap'n South, the road-agent. Now—"

"I deny your wild and silly accusations, sir!"

"All right! I'll take you 'crost to Fort Grant, an' let Maje Piety settle whether or no you're the critter as foolishd him out of all his boodle," grimly declared the vagabond.

But Foot-Hills Frank made a swift advance, one hand shoving aside that leveled revolver, at the same time coolly speaking:

"Steady, Speed! We're not playing hound for Major Piety, I reckon, and whether this gentleman is what you believe—"

"Which I positively deny, sir!"

"Whether Dean Maupin is Captain South or Captain North, a gentleman or a scoundrel, it's all the same to us. So I say—let Major Piety do his own dirty work, while we stick to our own knitting."

"Waal, sir, ef you say so—" reluctantly mumbled Harness.

"I do say so, Speed. And now," turning more squarely toward the two men from Nicodemus, "a final word of warning to you, gentlemen."

"This isn't healthy ground for the likes of you. There's no person around here who wishes to receive your calls even when paid openly and above board; while as for sneaking like this last—if *that's* tried on again, 'twill be shooting first and warning afterward!"

Jack Haltern made as though he would give retort or make another desperate assault, but cooler-headed Dean Maupin caught an arm and fairly forced him away, muttering something which neither Foot-Hills Frank nor Speed Harness could catch, but which seemed to in goodly measure calm the bruised desperado.

Haltern picked up his discarded clothing, together with his belt of arms, then the two men moved away in the direction of Nicodemus, those other twain standing side by side on the bench, watching them the while.

Neither man spoke a word while thus keeping watch, and neither so much as stirred while their enemies were yet in sight; but when a pile of gray rocks concealed Maupin and Haltern from their eyes, Speed Harness drew in a long breath, face and voice unusually grave as he looked into the scarcely marked face of the Fancy Sport.

"Well, you've had your own way, lad, and here's trying to hope it'll all pan out for the best; but—I'm dubious—mighty dubious, sir!"

"What about, old man?" more lightly asked the Sport.

"Waal," that slow, almost drawling manner of speaking coming back once more. "Waal, lad, ef et's all right, so much the better, but ef not—anyway I'm sayin' like this; hope ye won't see the time you'll blame me fer giving way to ye so durn easy, like!"

"Why would I blame you, old fellow?"

"Waal, they're pizen, both of 'em! Mind you don't ketch thar fangs!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

DISCUSSING WAYS AND MEANS.

Ever since "the boom" fairly struck Nicodemus, Dean Maupin had figured among its citizens, one of the most generally known if not exactly the most reputable.

Not that there was anything especially out of the way to speak of in connection with the Sport; for a gambler and all-around-man Maupin stood pretty near the head of his class; but past events showed that Dean would strip an unlucky player of his last dollar, then laugh him to scorn if he ventured to expect a modest stake when the game was over.

That was purely contrary to gambling tradition, and for that one reason the Nicodemus Sport dropped a notch or two in the general estimation.

Still, the Sport seemed to flourish quite in proportion with the town, and was one of the few "sporting members" who attained—and maintained—the glory of a private establishment.

After a modest enough fashion, taking size and outside style into consideration; but Maupin was still a bachelor, with few near chums, and his "little place" proved quite spacious enough for his needs, while its interior was both comfortable and "stylish."

So declared nearly all of those "sports" who had been favored with an invitation to that sanctum, and since cigars, whisky, brandy, not to mention more fancy drinkables, were found there in "elegant plenty," who shall fault their decision?

On the evening following their ill-starred visit to the Applebee claim out in the foot-hills, Dean Maupin and Jack Haltern were sole inmates of that snug retreat, leaning across a little card-table on which rested a box of cigars, a couple of glasses and a decanter of whisky.

Reckless Jack showed signs unmistakably of having been in a "bit of a scrap," although he looked in far better case than could have been expected by one who saw that lively tussle and did not thoroughly know the man; being kept in good physical condition by the manner of life he led through choice, Haltern quickly rallied from both hurts and bruises.

Just now his face was sour and sullen, while that of the gambler seemed much as usual—a cold, handsome blank, which few men could read aright against its owner's will.

For some little time the close parads had been closeted here, discussing ways and means, laying aside the mask with each other, knowing that any such caution was needless; if none other, the twain could put full trust in one another.

As yet nothing had been heard from Captain North or Major Piety.

"I'm not so certain that the fellow wasn't trying to run a pure bluff on me," half-musingly observed Maupin, narrowing his eyes to better watch the blue vapor curling slowly up from the ashen tip of his cigar.

"And never 'lowed to tackle the paymaster at all, is it?"

"Pretty much that, yes. If he had—and yet, I don't know. Maybe that dose of rattler laid the gallant major out—dead drunk."

The trickster laughed a bit at the recollection, but Jack Haltern failed to chime in as usual.

The big fellow was looking back at his recent overthrow, wondering how much pretty Nell Applebee had seen or heard of it all.

There lay the keenest smart of all.

The mere fact of his having been bested by another good man might have been laughed off; for, after all, 'twas something of a fluke; but the knowledge that *she* might have been an eye-witness, and even given her sweet congratulations to her victorious champion!

Dean Maupin leaned a bit further across the table, pressing the end of his

cigar against the hairy hand which lay nearest him. With a sharp oath Haltern roused from his gloomy musings, demanding:

"What in blazes are you trying to do, anyway?"

"Merely waking you up, pardner," retorted the gambler, showing his teeth in a half-vicious smile. "Is this a time for such infernal folly as you're indulging in, man alive? Can't you see that we've got to *do* something, and do that something mighty sudden, too?"

"I'm ready, pard, but next thing comes: do what?"

"Make up in part for our last fizzle—devil burn such luck, anyway!" with sudden fierceness in face and voice, his tight-clenched fist striking the table hard enough to set both glasses and decanter dancing a brief jig.

"Devil burn the one who foolishd us, after we foolishd *them*!" was the amendment offered by Reckless Jack. "I'd give more'n one big round penny to know his name this minute, too!"

"Don't talk of it, Jack! Every time I think that way—but let it drop, I say!"

"If the boys would agree to that same," grimly added Haltern. "Maybe I've heard a bit more of it than you, as captain, but—well, they're red-hot and still a-grow-ing!"

"What do they say, mostly, Jack?"

"I could tell you better what they haven't said, pardner," with a certain grim facetiousness. "But, as a sample: they say it's nasty work meddling with Uncle Sam's affairs at best, but when it comes to taking all the risk and finger-ing none of the boodle—that's heap sight worse!"

"The snarling whelps! Do they dare insinuate that I've played them dirt?" sharply demanded the chief of road-raiders.

"Well, some gave a weenty hint that way, for a fact, but of course they were wild—too wild for any sort of use! We wouldn't act off the dead level, would we, pardner?"

Maupin showed his teeth in a half-grin, hardly relishing that thinly masked sneer, for that was precisely what the two leaders had planned in advance: to "skip out with the boodle" as soon as fairly won.

"We didn't get a chance to, anyway, Jack. The money-box is gone, and so far as I can make out we haven't even the ghost of a chance to recover it, either: worse luck us!"

Again Reckless Jack burst forth in savage imprecations against the crooked luck which stuck to them so closely, and showered curses innumerable upon the head of the cunning demon who had profited by their daring trick.

Dean Maupin sat in grim quiet until his mate fairly exhausted himself after this fashion, then he spoke in grave enough tones:

"That's pretty much what I meant by saying we'd got to get a he-old hustle on us, Jack. The treasury's empty. My pockets ditto. The lads are beginning to show their teeth, and may conclude to try 'em on our bones if they lack richer meat."

"What more can we do, though?"

"Well, I've been thinking, and I've been skirmishing 'round just a little bit to-day. There's one little job we might tackle, with more than a fair promise of money in it, but—well, to tell the honest truth, Jack, it's rather a come-down from running the road!"

"There's money in it, you say? How big?"

"Plenty for the risk to be run, far as that goes."

"What is it, then?"

"I'll tell you honest. I've been making a quiet little investigation on my own hook, this afternoon. You know the old fellow who so innocently helped us bamboozle Captain North?"

"Yes. What of him? Who and what is he, anyway?"

"A rich old codger, speculating in mines and mining property. He's out

here in part to inspect his investments, but came prepared to pick up whatever good thing he might chance to stumble across. Just how much hard cash he brought with him I'll never tell ye, Jack; but I know 'twas enough to put a nice warm lining in our pockets if we conclude to turn the trick."

Maupin spoke with growing earnestness, showing clearly enough that he favored attempting that same little trick; but Haltern was more cautious than usual with him, slowly speaking:

"Turn it, how? Foolish the old rat and grip him tight for ransom, is it?"

The gambler hesitated a bit, his eyes shifting under that keen gaze as though their owner hardly liked to speak plainer. But then he said:

"Well, no, Jack. 'Twould take too much time and trouble. Since our fiasco with the major's boodle, we've got pretty much the whole country down on us, and so—don't you see?"

"What's all that got to do with this trick, though?"

"Everything, you thick-pate!" impatiently exploded the gambler. "I look at it like this: if we don't skip out in a hurry, we'll get rammed into a corner where the only way out will be—up a tree!"

"Not while I can grip knife or pull trigger, anyway."

"That won't hinder long, Jack, and you know it. So—right here you have my idea of it."

"We're flat broke. We can't well live without rocks. We want to pull out o' this, sudden! Now—listen, please."

"Of course, it's quite a come-down from our usual level, but I've got Colonel Webb Watkins spotted, and I know we can get at his boodle by simply trying it on."

Reckless Jack turned head to spit sharply over shoulder, his bruised face the very picture of disgust at that conclusion.

"A come-down? Well, I should say so! Turn sneak-thief, eh?"

"Call it playing burglar, Jack, if only for the sound of it," half-mocked the gambler, then adding in earnest: "Can we afford to be so mighty squeamish, pardner? There's a fat roll waiting for us, and only one old man to handle while freezing fast to it. Now—question!"

Reckless Jack was in no particular haste about replying, helping himself to a glass of liquor and a fresh cigar the while.

To do him simple justice, he revolted from such work.

Jack Haltern was far more sinner than saint, yet he was not utterly worthless, even from a moral point of view.

He could stop a stage, in company or single-handed, and if necessary would drop a man dead or crippled without hesitation while thus engaged.

He did not disdain trickery while circumventing an enemy, while a lie was never too big for easy passage through his throat; but he would not lie to save himself from punishment for any such work, nor would he deign to strike an enemy from cover or behind his back when the odds were anything like even.

He did not mind being dubbed road-agent or toll-taker; robber had no harsh sound in his ears; but—thief!

Much of this Dean Maupin could read in that face during the next few moments, and seeing so much, he played the trump-card held in reserve.

"It's all right if you only think that way, Haltern, but I'm going to try for that wad, even if you do go back on your old pard!"

A hot flush leaped into that bronzed face, and Reckless Jack plunged over head and ears into the cunning trap, just as its maker expected.

"Who's going back on you, Maupin? You can't expect me to lie like Satan and say I like the job when I don't. But, all the same, I'm ready for that or anything else, just so you say so."

"It's pretty much a ground-hog case, Jack!"

"All right, Dean; that's enough chin-music. When shall we turn the trick, and just how?"

"To-night if at all, Jack. Somehow I feel it in my bones that bad luck's crowding closer on our heels all the time! That infernal North; who can he be, anyway, pardner?"

"Ask me an easier one, Maupin!"

"I tried my level to place him, last night, but—well, there was something familiar to me in both look and tones, but for the life of me I couldn't just locate the rascal!"

"I know where I'll locate him if I ever get a chance!"

"Where, Jack?"

"In a high lot on the hillside, of course! Now—when shall we graduate as—ugh!—sneak-thieves, pardner?"

"As burglars, Jack! Listen, then, and I'll tell you my idea of it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DARE-DEVIL EXPEDIENT.

With the faintest possible click the bolt shot back, and he whose cunning hand turned nippers in lock flashed a swift look over his shoulder up and down that narrow corridor.

That was like the passage-way running between a double row of contracted bed-chambers common to all new-town hotels; a bare and dimly lighted avenue extending from front to rear, each chamber with a narrow transom opening upon the corridor, an oil lamp generally burning at the head of the narrow flight of stairs, with like illumination at each turn or bend in the passage.

Without attracting notice their way, the two knaves had entered the hotel, which was easy enough, since the front door was never locked or barred.

They passed upstairs like any regular but belated boarders, first making sure the way was clear, then pausing at the door of the room assigned to Colonel Watkins.

This was locked, as a matter of course; but Dean Maupin had come prepared for just such an emergency, and with Reckless Jack keeping guard, he quickly "nipped" the lock.

The lamp at the head of the stairs burned dimly, turned very low by a hand as the burglars passed beneath that bracket, and with that exception all was darkness near the two knaves at work.

Then, bit by bit Maupin turned the knob, pushing the door ajar, listening long enough with ear close to crevice to make sure their victim was soundly sleeping.

"It's all right, pardner," he softly whispered, turning face that way for a moment. "I hear him breathing—almost snoring!"

"Get through with it, then!"

Maupin pushed the door far enough in to let himself slip through, followed a bit later by Reckless Jack, who closed the barrier behind himself, standing still in his tracks while his more practiced mate struck a noiseless match, the light of which he masked in joined palms.

They saw the colonel sleeping peacefully, face partly turned away from them; and then, every movement absolutely noiseless, Maupin lifted the chimney off the night-lamp standing on the washstand, touching wick with match, thus providing a more permanent light.

In all probability Colonel Watkins was particularly sensitive to light, for certainly no sound was made which could have disturbed his placid slumbers; yet he gave a restless stir, catching breath sharply, almost before the oil-saturated wick was fairly ignited.

"Look out, pardner!" came a grating warning from Reckless Jack, who at the same instant sprang to the bedside, ready to do his share in the ugly work now he was fairly committed to the robbery.

None too swiftly taken was this action, either, for Colonel Watkins turned

quickly toward the light, lids flying open and lips parting to give a cry of angry surprise.

But Haltern clapped one broad palm over those lips, his other hand tightly clutching throat, thus effectually checking all outcry.

Maupin whirled on the instant, teeth showing whitely in a vicious snarl, his right hand gripping haft of knife, the bright blade of which flashed in the lamplight a moment later.

"Quiet, you fool!" he muttered, savagely yet barely above his breath, as he came forward with menacing blade. "Give even a weenty yelp and I swear to slit your fool throat too quick for—"

"Easy, mate!" warned his comrade, deftly using an elbow to push that ugly weapon aside. "No butcher-business while—"

"Only if he cuts up too mighty rusty. We don't mean to hurt you, old man, but if you play the fool—"

"It's boodle we're after, not blood," chipped in Reckless Jack, for once in his career showing scant deference to his chief, possibly demoralized by that woe-ful descent from road-raiding to sneak-thievery.

"Where is your wad, curse you?" viciously added the gambler, shaking blade before those widely opened eyes as he muttered.

"Go through his rags, there, can't you?" growlingly spoke the tall crook, again employing that nimble elbow. "If the boodle isn't there, time enough then to—steady, old gent! Squirming can't help you, just now, and—what the devil are you trying to do, mate?"

For as Maupin turned to examine the garments lying upon and across the back of the wooden chair near the head of the bed, a heavy gold watch slipped from pocket to floor as he lifted the coat and vest.

That sound in itself was hardly sufficient to rouse up even the lightest of sleepers, but it played its own part in the night's work, nevertheless, as was quickly proven.

Maupin swiftly ran fingers into pockets, searching vainly for "the wad" which he felt fairly confident this mining speculator carried somewhere about him; but before that search could be made complete, a faint sound just without the chamber door startled both robbers.

A sound too faint and uncertain for either man to recognize with nothing more to guide them; but that lack was quickly supplied, for the door was flung wide, and a vision in white confronted them!

Of the two knaves Reckless Jack seemed the most thoroughly startled at this sight, possibly because he had had far less experience in playing burglar.

He let loose of the colonel to wheel that way, giving a low curse of amazement as he recognized a woman in night attire! And that woman revolver in hand and pointing their way, even as she parted lips to cry aloud at the top of her voice:

"Father, what—oh! Thieves! Robbers! Help!"

Cursing viciously, Dean Maupin struck the colonel heavily in the face as the old soldier essayed to spring out of bed, knocking him back half-stunned and speechless for the moment.

"Skip, pardner!" he cried, harshly, ducking low his head as Rosamond Watkins began to shoot. "Rack out before the she-devil—git, I say!"

Even as he gave this swift warning, Maupin was taking action to save himself, reaching the one window of that chamber, kicking out glass and lower sash with it, then leaping through the opening thus made without stopping to see what manner of landing was to be his without.

If Reckless Jack heard, he hardly heeded so far as instant obedience went, for in place of following his mate through the window, he swung out one long arm, dashing the kerosene lamp from stand to

floor, meaning simply to put out the light and thus blend all in darkness.

The glass globe broke to splinters as it struck the floor, but unluckily the burning wick set fire to the low-grade oil, flames leaping up in a smoky sheet, threatening to wrap all in fire before aught could be done to hinder.

At the same instant Haltern ducked low and sprang forward, thus foiling the shot which was hastily aimed at his person by Rosamond, and before the maiden could fairly realize her peril, the revolver was knocked out of her hand while a strong arm was flung about her waist, sweeping her off her feet with a dizzying swing.

She shrieked aloud at this fresh peril, while Colonel Watkins shouted hoarsely as he rallied sufficiently to recognize the voice of his idolized daughter.

Reckless Jack, with the same movement which swept Rosamond off her feet, turned toward the window through which Dean Maupin had escaped, for he meant to take that same leap into the night; but he recoiled from the leaping flames, backing out through the chamber door instead.

All this transpired with truly wonderful rapidity, and the echoes of that first shriek for help and the first shot from Rosamond's pistol had not yet entirely died away; but the alarm was already spreading through the hotel, and Haltern heard enough to warn him against any attempt to escape by the way he had entered.

Quick to plan, swift to execute, the desperado clapped one hand over the maiden's mouth to stifle her shrieks, then sprang through the open doorway of the chamber opposite; none other than that from which Rosamond had issued when alarmed by sound from and light in her father's room, as seen and heard through open transoms.

Reckless Jack kicked the door to behind himself, then turned key in lock as a further precaution, after which he sprang over to the window on that side of the house, crushing his captive against the wall so as to free one hand, and at the same time be able to stifle her dangerous cries for help.

He jerked the lower sash open, and thrust forth his head and shoulders, only to draw back with a low, vicious curse of mingled rage and disappointment. One look was quite sufficient, for it showed him a deep and rocky gully reaching clear up to the side of the hotel itself; a fact which he had forgotten for the moment until thus recalled.

As he let sash drop and turned, Reckless Jack saw a ruddy glow coming through the transom, and knew that a fresh peril was added to the rest. The hotel was on fire, and—hark!

Wild shouts and cries, fierce oaths and curses, heavily trampling feet both within the corridors and a number of the chambers, all went to tell the desperado how thoroughly the place was awakened, and what scant mercy he might expect should he fall alive into their hands with the double brand of burglar and firebug fixed upon him.

"Help! Father—help!" huskily cried poor Rosamond, beginning to rally after having been half-suffocated in that bear-like hug.

Oddly enough, that appeal for help served to show Haltern a possible avenue of escape, and he at once caught at the forlorn hope, although the bare notion might well have shaken the nerves of even a brave man.

Swift as thought itself he caught a sheet and blanket from the rumpled bed, wrapping them hurriedly around Rosamond, lifting her in his powerful arms, kicking the door clear back as he jerked the knob his way, then bowing head and rushing along the smoke-darkened, flame-lighted corridor toward the stairs leading to the lower level.

"Fire! fire!" he shouted in seemingly frantic tones. "My wife is—oh, let me save my darling wife before—fire! fire! fire!"

As he came to the head of the stairs Haltern met a number of men rushing to the rescue, but he tore through them like one insane from fear, knocking some to the right, others to the left, thus plunging down the stairs and out upon the street; but then Rosamond managed to cry aloud:

"Help! this man is a—robber! Help, for love of heaven!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A SURPRISE FOR SERGEANT CLUTTERBUCK.

Rosamond was struggling in that close hug with increasing vigor, but it was not until the open air was gained by the audacious desperado that she contrived to free her face sufficiently to make herself heard amid that rapidly swelling tumult.

As she cried out thus, one corner of the blanket dropped low enough for Reckless Jack to tread upon it, the jerk in part destroying his balance, and he saved himself from falling only by a desperate effort of both strength and skill.

Rosamond nearly slipped out of his grip, and shrieked anew, but even then the dare-devil might have won fairly clear with his uneasy prize save for one thing; he stumbled almost into the arms of a uniformed figure there under the red glow of the hotel lamp.

"Steady, you!" cried this personage, one strong arm rising to save both from the collision, but then his voice and manner altered with dawning recognition. "You, is it? Now I have got—"

Reckless Jack was equally swift to recognize this awkward fact, and even more quick in action, for he struck out straight and viciously, catching Sergeant Clutterbuck square in the throat, knocking the trooper backward like a bifurcated nine-pin.

Even as he dealt this stroke, Reckless Jack glimpsed another face and heard another harsh voice yell out in ugly warning:

"It's a raid! It's Captain South, and—down him, men!"

With the cry came a savage blow, which the desperado only partially foiled, though it caused him to let fall his captive and turn half-way around; eyes blurring and head giving a dizzy whirl.

Haltern knew both face and voice, but before Tom Damper could follow up his advantage, a trim little figure leaped forward, striking with clubbed revolver before which the stalwart fellow went down like a wet-sodden log.

A hand clutched Reckless Jack and a voice urged him away from the scene of danger, and that told him who was playing a friendly card in his little game.

"Quick, pard! Make a run for it or—now!"

And then the two pards dashed away out of the lamplight to whirl around the near corner, there vanishing in the gloom of night before either Clutterbuck or Damper could rally sufficiently to hinder, or even to call again for the arrest of the daring criminals.

All around was confusion worse confounded, men flocking to the spot half-wild with excitement, for the most part echoing the ever-thrilling cry of fire, never so blood-stirring as in a "wooden town" where all facilities for fighting the flames are wanting.

When the two men rallied, their human game had vanished, nor could either say just how or by whom their downfall had been effected.

One of the first sights which greeted their eyes was Foot-Hills Frank assisting Rosamond Watkins, having seen that young lady flung to one side by some stalwart fellow, who appeared to have thought only for himself.

The young woman would have fallen flat but for reeling against the side of the hotel, and seeing her condition, the Fancy Sport snatched up the blanket lying there, overturning a man or two to win full possession of the cover, then calling Miss Watkins by name as he hastened to wrap her well in the woolen screen.

As he did this, Rosamond gave a half-choked cry of blended fright, grief and joy, for she saw the colonel come plunging through that narrow doorway, blood trickling from a bruise and cut in his face, his night-rig showing signs of the flames through which he had plunged, thinking only of his beloved child, just then.

"Father—papa!"

"Here, sir!" added the Fancy Sport, before the old soldier could fairly locate that loved voice. "Miss Watkins is all right, and you—make way, there, you crazy hot-heads!"

Guarding the young lady with one arm, Foot-Hills Frank made swift and effective use of his other member, quickly reuniting father and daughter, neither of them much the worse for their recent experience, but hardly in attire suitable for street-use!

Fortunately, however, few among the many who had been attracted to the spot by that swift-spreading alarm had eyes or thoughts for any such insignificant details, and as soon as he could convey his meaning to the couple whom he had already served so well, the Fancy Sport hurried them away, making as directly as possible for a private house where he knew a welcome would be assured any friend of his.

By the time that friendly portal was crossed, fair Rosamond began to realize her embarrassing condition, and with only the briefest possible thanks to her rescuer, she fled, in company with the good housewife, leaving the colonel to make such explanations as might be essential.

The poor colonel, also, was in sad case; since he had neither time nor thought to waste upon his garments, with flames leaping up all about him, and the frightened screams of Rosamond still ringing in his ears as he rallied from the heavy blow which knocked him back upon his bed.

Luckily, Fitch was well posted as to matters and things in general about that home, and he soon had sufficient clothing to spare the blushes of the ex-volunteer, hastily questioning Watkins the while.

Foot-Hills Frank learned little of importance from the colonel, however; only that both fire and alarm had been caused by burglars, who just as certainly had been at the bottom of his daughter's disagreeable experience.

Leaving Colonel Watkins in charge of the good housewife when Mrs. Dempsey came back, Foot-Hills Frank hurried away toward the hotel, eager to learn just what had been the outcome of all that uproar.

Fitch found that the fire had been extinguished without material damage to other than the chamber in which the alarm originated, thanks to the swiftness with which the word spread, and to an unusual supply of water, which by good luck happened to be upon the premises.

He found, too, that the clothes of Colonel Watkins had been rescued from the flames; in a sadly damaged condition, 'tis true, yet sufficiently soon to preserve such valuables as had been in their possession.

In addition to all this, the Fancy Sport learned that, right or wrong, the whole affair was credited to Captain South and some of his daring band, although no person seemed inclined—if indeed able—to give any fair grounds for holding such a belief.

This so far as the general public went, but when Foot-Hills Frank made his way out of the now crowded hotel to outer air, he was seen and at once accosted by Sergeant Clutterbuck.

"I say, Mr. Fitch!"

"You, is it?" a bit gruffly said the Sport, twisting his arm away from that detaining hand with more rudeness than courtesy, his mind turning back to that unpleasant scene in which Major Dix Piety played so conspicuous a part at the Applebee cabin.

"Oh, come, now, old fellow; don't hold a grudge against me for what another was solely responsible," quickly urged the sergeant, still barring the way, a tall, athletic figure keeping close at his elbow the while.

"I saw you when—I want to find Dean Maupin and Jack Haltern, one or both; can you direct me, Fitch?"

"One's that cursed Cap'n South, and t'other is—" harshly began the stalwart shadow, but for reasons of his own the Fancy Sport did not care to "mix in" with Tom Damper just then, and, turning a cold shoulder that way, just as coldly answered Sergeant Clutterbuck:

"That's your dirty job, sergeant, not mine. When I play hound, 'tis after game of my own rousing. So—good luck go with you!"

Without waiting for reply or retort, Frank slipped past the trooper, and quickly vanished amid that still thoroughly excited crowd.

Tom Damper gave some very positive oaths at this cavalier treatment, but as Sergeant Clutterbuck pushed on in quest of his human game, the tall tough followed after, fairly on fire for vengeance; for his head still bore the impress of Dean Maupin's revolver-butt, and, right or wrong, he was willing to make oath that Nicodemus Sport was none other than the notorious Captain South, who so audaciously "foolished" the paymaster out of an ordinary fortune.

By this time the night was pretty well spent, but, after that wild alarm and exciting spell, plenty of citizens gave no thought to bed or slumber further, so there was stir and bustle enough to cover over the busy search for those two men made by Sergeant Clutterbuck.

But the night wore itself away and the new day came without his finding either Dean Maupin or Jack Haltern, and, having ere this shaken off his informant, Tom Damper, the trooper bethought himself of breakfast.

That fiery episode no little disturbed the usual routine at the hotel, but, guided by his sensitive nose, following up an appetizing smell of cookery, Sergeant Clutterbuck stepped inside a restaurant, there to surprise Foot-Hills Frank, just beginning his delayed breakfast.

When a swift glance assured himself that the trooper was no longer accompanied by that unwelcome personage, Fitch gave back a more natural greeting as Clutterbuck took a seat at the same table.

Just then they proved to be the sole guests, which will in part account for the fact that Sergeant Clutterbuck frankly explained what manner of business had brought him to Nicodemus from the Fort.

"Fact is, Fitch, I'm here on that money-box business. Major Piety got wind of the fact that the cunning rascals who flim-flammed him so neatly over at Black-tail Springs, were hiding-out here; and so—well, I was willing enough to take a hand in, you understand?"

"In hopes of wiping out your share of that score, of course?"

"That's about the size of it," admitted the sergeant, flushing a bit at the memory. "It's stuck mighty tight in my craw ever since, and now—can't you help me a bit, Fitch?"

Just then a red-eyed and slipshod waiter brought the sergeant's order, and neither man spoke again until he had shuffled away once more.

Then Foot-Hills Frank looked half-quizzically across at the trooper, coffee-cup pausing in front of his lips as they shaped the question:

"What have you done with Captain North, sergeant?"

"I don't—what do you mean by that?" ejaculated Clutterbuck.

"Just this: that Tom Damper is Captain North, himself!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SURPRISE FOR FOOT-HILLS FRANK. Sergeant Clutterbuck recoiled with a sharp gasp.

He stared half-dazedly at his vis-a-vis, but the Sport merely nodded his head in affirmation as he lifted cup to lips.

"What! That fellow? Oh, you're joking, Fitch!"

"Never more in earnest, I assure you, sergeant."

"But, it simply *can't* be, man alive!"

"All the same, Clutterbuck, I'm giving you straight goods," persisted the Sport, his tones low, for he had no desire to take yonder sleepy-looking waiter into their confidence.

Clutterbuck sat staring into the handsome face apparently unable to believe such a preposterous assertion.

"He—Tom Damper?" he exclaimed.

"Shall I say it all over again, sergeant?" with a half-sneer. "Can't you savvy plain United States this morning? Or did that little jolt you caught last night knock your wits all contrary?"

"Why, man, he was the very person who hunted up Major Piety and told him—he swore up hill and down that Dean Maupin, of this camp, was none other than Captain South, and that Jack Haltern was the other! Why, I can't make it seem true, Fitch!"

"All the same, sergeant, 'tis another case of pot calling kettle all over black," declared the Foot-Hills Sport. "Merely spite-work, and a clumsy parody on the old trick: wolf playing sheep the better to rid himself of a rival."

"Well, you talk just as though you really believed it all, too!"

"Why wouldn't I, when I can prove every charge I make?" a bit more gravely retorted the Fancy Sport.

"You remember hearing about the stage hold-up, Clutterbuck?" he added.

"When you chipped in? Yes. We met you, afterward, remember?"

"I know. Well, I caught a fair, square view of Captain North's face when he was upset by the colonel, and I can make oath to just this: if Captain North held up that hearse, then Tom Damper is Captain North!"

"You knew all this, yet never—why haven't you nabbed him long ago, then?"

A slight smile flitted over the Sport's face, but his tones were smooth and even as he made reply:

"Well, I hardly had time to arrest the gentleman, *then*, sergeant."

"But since? When you saw him with me, last night? Why didn't you tell me, then?"

A low chuckle, then the answer:

"For one reason, sergeant: I play my own hand, not yours. And, too, I have precious little cause for loving you troopers, and still less since Major Piety played drunken cur over at Applebee's place."

The tones had become severe, and at the final words Fitch rose to his feet and turned to leave the restaurant.

Clutterbuck, half-famished, as he really was, never waited to clear a plate, tossing the sleepy-eyed waiter a coin in payment as he hastily started off on the track of the Foot-Hills Scout.

Fitch frowned as the other approached, and turned with forbidding aspect, to say:

"Would you tumble if a house was to lie down on you, sergeant?"

"That's all right, Mr. Fitch," returned the sergeant, slipping a hand through the arm nearest him while adding: "You can't outrun me, and I hardly reckon you'll go so far as to knock me down, either!"

In spite of himself that idea brought a smile to his face, and in more natural tones the Sport retorted:

"I've told you pretty much all you'll ever get from my lips, sergeant, ply you the pump never so briskly!"

"Well, that isn't exactly what I'm going to do, first-off, Fitch," assumed Clutterbuck. "Major Piety—"

"I'm not anxious to hear aught about that disgrace to the cloth, sergeant, and so—drop it, please!" cut in Frank, his

eyes catching an ominous glitter the while.

"But, man!" expostulated the trooper, "you'll surely let a poor devil deliver a message intrusted him?"

"If it's a message from the cur you name—"

"Wait, Fitch; give me half a chance," urged Clutterbuck. "I let it clean slip my memory when we met up with each other, last night, but now—the major sends his humble apologies to you, through me."

"I flatly decline to receive them in any such shape, I tell you."

"He says he was drunk, that time, because of the snake-bite, and not wholly responsible for either his words or his actions."

"The plea of a coward and a cur!"

"Well, Fitch, hardly that bad," amended the trooper. "Take him when he's sober—"

"Look ye here, pardner," and the Sport squarely faced the sergeant: "Since you're bound on having the whole thing set forth in form, right here you see my little platform:

"If Major Dix Piety wishes to apologize, let him do it as a white man ought. Let him sober off, then make amends right where he made his bad break."

"At Applebee's, you mean, Fitch?"

"Yes. In the presence of the lady and gentleman whom he so cravenly insulted: let him apologize and beg *their* forgiveness. If not, then the next time we meet—and I'll take a day or two off just to fetch that meeting about—I'll treat him like the cur he showed himself, over yonder! I'll lash him until he bears fifty-fold the number of red stripes on the flag he insulted by getting drunk while under its protection!"

The sergeant listened in grim silence to this fierce yet low-voiced outbreak; then said, gravely:

"Very well, sir; I've delivered the message which I was entrusted, and I assure you that your reply shall be just as faithfully carried back to Major Piety, if I live to get there. Now, suppose we talk a little more like the good friends we once were, Frank?"

"You mean something more than just that, sergeant," surmised the other, yet giving a slight smile at that coaxing tone.

"Well, yes," admitted Clutterbuck. "I want you to tell me something more about this—this odd affair, you understand, Fitch?"

"I've told you pretty much all I feel at liberty to say, just at present, pardner."

"But, if it's made well worth your time and trouble, Fitch? There's a big reward offered for recovery of that money-box, as well as for the capture of the head-knives who turned the trick. If you will try for that, I believe you can make big money, Fitch."

So urged the sergeant, but Foot-Hills Frank shook head in negation, coolly saying:

"Thanks, sergeant; but I wear no man's collar. I'll not lie to you, though, old man, so—just mark this much down in red letters: I mean to run the road-raiding gang in, but I'll do that in my own good time and after my own fashion!"

Clutterbuck looked worried, for he could not understand this man, so thorough was the alteration in him.

Foot-Hills Frank smiled faintly at this, for his keen eyes found no difficulty in reading those thoughts aright.

"I'm reeling it off to you like a string, sergeant, and never the breath of a lie in it all! I know just who the road-raiders are, and I hold firm faith that I can yank 'em from taw whenever I get good and ready."

"Was that fellow lying clean through when he charged Dean Maupin with being Captain South?" hesitatingly asked Clutterbuck.

"Tom Damper was born a liar, and has been improving on nature's botch-

work ever since," averred the Sport, without more directly answering that question.

"But—you swore he was—is—Captain North!"

"Did I? Well, then I'll say it over again, and say it slow. Tom Damper is the character people in these parts dub Captain North. He and his gang held up the Boomerang stage, thinking Colonel Watkins was your Major Piety; but Captain North did not trick your outfit and get away with the boodle. That was the work of Captain South, and he is—"

The sergeant was listening with almost breathless eagerness to this revelation of more than one puzzling mystery, but he was fated not to hear all, then nor there, for Frank, just at that moment, caught sight of a dusty, rough-clad figure coming rapidly that way, and instantly recognized Speed Harness, the mountain vagabond.

Even at that distance Frank seemed to recognize something far out of ordinary, and hastened away to the more quickly meet the man.

A shout and wave of hand caught Speed's eye, and a few seconds later the panting footman was huskily speaking:

"All blazes to pay, boss! The little lady is—"

"Nell? What of her? Speak out, Harness!"

"Raid—both gone—Nell and her—pap!" panted the vagabond.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PLAYING THEIR LAST CARD.

The hand of Dean Maupin still gripped an arm of his taller running-mate when the two foiled burglars darted around the corner of the hotel, where they where almost instantly swallowed up by the shadows.

In that wild confusion men in swift motion caused little or no wonder, and no effort was made to intercept the couple.

Realizing this, and once more the cool, nervy Sport Nicodemus had known so long if not so favorably, Maupin slackened his pace and with it the flight of reckless Jack Haltern.

"Steady, lad!" was his sharp warning. "There's more in this than I fancy, but—use your ears and eyes, Jack!"

Making a turn and keeping well on the other side of the street, Maupin ran far enough that way to both see and hear Sergeant Clutterbuck and big Tom Damper.

What he heard caused his face to pale more, and there was tremor in the hand which signed Haltern to come away from those dangerous quarters.

During the next few minutes, both knaves were busy enough, picking up information separately, to come together later on for mutual reports.

They learned that the fire was extinguished without material loss, and that Colonel Watkins had escaped in safety.

They knew now that Tom Damper had accused the gambler of being the notorious road-raider, Captain South, and that busy search was being made for them both throughout the town by the informer and Sergeant Clutterbuck, if no other enemies.

Reckless Jack likewise reported that Foot-Hills Frank appeared to be "in the mix," and his curses were picturesque if not graceful.

Then, seated in the dark lest the show of light should betray them to their enemies, the two men weighed the situation together, striving to settle upon their wisest course of action.

"If you'd followed me, in place of playing fool with that girl!" muttered the gambler. "What the demon were you thinking of, anyway, Jack?"

Haltern explained briefly, since it was a "ground-hog case," he tried to make the best of a poor bargain.

First, he saw no other method of escaping from the hotel without clearing a path with bullet and steel; second, lacking any more available booty, what was the matter with holding the girl for a heavy ransom? As well be killed for sheep as for weanling, surely!

"Only for that we might have bluffed it out," declared Maupin. "But now—all those devils saw and recognized you, and what they may lack the girl will be able to supply! So we've got to light out o' this, and that in a hurry, Jack!"

Reckless Jack proved in part worthy his title, offering to bear the brunt of the fighting which might follow if he could have one more fair swing at Frank Fitch; but Maupin promptly put an end to such wild chatter, using his really powerful influence to get Haltern fairly on the retreat, to lie low for a better show.

They took such minor valuables as would be apt to fit in handily with their coming movements, then stole cautiously out of and away from the building, more than half expecting an attack from their enemies in force.

But nothing of the sort took place, and keeping well among the shadows, steering clear of any close encounter with any citizen, the couple contrived to escape from Nicodemus without trouble.

When once fairly free, with all the foot-hills before them where a little army might be dodged with comparative ease, the two villains felt more at ease, and took time for considering their case more thoroughly.

As usual, where there was planning to be done, Dean Maupin was quickest with suggestion, and ere long he made one which fairly electrified his companion.

"Well, I reckon we may count one point fairly settled, Jack," was his beginning as they stood on the slope, gazing back toward Nicodemus.

"Looks like our goose was, anyway!" muttered Haltern, in his turn. "But I'd have some mighty smart fun out of the smash-up, only for you, mate!"

"With Foot-Hills, is it, Jack?"

"You know it!"

"Wait, Jack, and maybe the fun'll come, after all," retorted the gambler. "Now, this looks the way of it to me:

"It's growing too mighty hot around these diggings for comfort. If we try to stick it out, we'll end in a rope jig, with nothing for a footing; and that's highly against my constitution, old man!"

"Go on. Say something if you must chin-chin!"

"All right, Jack, and here goes. We've got to pull our freight or else lie mighty snug in cover for the next while or longer. Now, I do hate to leave all that boodle behind me, pardner!"

Reckless Jack made an impatient gesture.

"How are you going to get around it, though?"

"I believe that either Foot-Hills Frank or Speed Harness played us double-dirt that night, and got away with the money-box while we were tricked by that dummy camp-fire."

"Maybe so, but—go on!"

"Anyway it's a chance we haven't fully tested, Jack, and so I'm saying like this: If either or both of those devils turned the trick, we can get the whole truth out of—eh?"

Haltern gave a violent start, then sharply spoke:

"Well?"

"Let's make it well!" quickly cried the gambler. "Let's take her, and hold her, and right there we'll play the best trump in the whole deck, pardner!"

"You mean—it's Nell you're talking about, Maupin?"

"Sure! Who else, man, dear?"

"But, mind ye, pard!"—and Reckless Jack gripped an arm almost savagely—"that girl's dearer far to me than all the rest of this world! Rather than see harm come her way, I'd die! I'd kill you, like a mad wolf if I thought—"

"You're thinking too mighty much,

Jack," and the gambler faced the dangerous man without the slightest show of fear. "Who spoke of harming the girl, pray?"

"You surely said—"

"Hold her, not harm her! I say, jump down on the claim, pick up the girl, and then light out for one of the old hiding places. Coax or trick the secret out of Nell, after which—well, I thought you were dead-gone on the little witch, Jack?"

"You know it, Maupin! But—"

"Then what's the matter with you, anyway? You'll be dealing Foot Hills the heaviest blow imaginable, and at the same time have full swing with the girl. If you can't coax her over your way, then do the other thing!"

"Steady, pard!" warned Haltern, but with agitation betraying how intensely he was excited. "I'd give nine-tenths of my life-lease to win and wear Nell Applebee, but if it's come my way at all, it's got to be through her say-so, not yours! So far as coaxing goes—"

"That's all right, then," cut in the gambler, making a start. "Come, Jack! Or—have I got to play a lone hand from now on?"

Haltern sprang after his leader, both ready and willing to play his part in the fresh deal; but as the two hurried along through the fast waning night, Reckless Jack took particular pains to make Maupin understand just how far he would be permitted to go where Nell Applebee was concerned.

"She's a lady, Dean, and's got to be treated plum' white! There isn't a man drawing breath this night I'd do more for or stand more from than you; but, sure as there's a heaven above us, Maupin, I'd kill you like the veriest cur if you dared lay rough hand on that girl!"

With a sneer the gambler gave assurance that he would act well within reason.

"If we have to frighten her a bit, to make her talk? And the old man; what if he should cut up rusty, Jack?" he suggested.

"I'll have no killing, Maupin; that much is settled," declared Jack as they hurried on through the now gray dawn. "Of course, if we run up against Speed Harness, why—"

"I'll lay him out too cold for skinning, even though you tried to shield him with your own body, pard!" vowed the gambler.

"That's all right, pardner. I'm not caring for such low-down truck, but when it comes to Nell or her Pap—that's heap sight different!"

The two pards pressed on through the dawn, eager to play their last card in that desperate game, but with this difference: Dean Maupin was thinking solely of money, Jack Haltern of love and love's reward!

Well acquainted with the lay of the ground, and "traveling light," the two daring desperadoes made rapid progress, taking a route which would have been impracticable for horsemen but which materially shortened the distance to be traversed.

The day was fairly dawning as they came within long rifle-range of the Applebee cabin, when, suddenly, the sound of shots and fierce yells came to their ears from straight ahead. After a brief recoil they rushed on, to stop short once more as they came in sight of the Applebee home.

"Look!" cried Maupin, pointing.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SWOOP OF THE ROAD-RAIDERS.

As a rule they were early risers at the Applebee home, and this morning was no exception.

Pretty Nell was astir at the first sign of day, busying herself for the morning meal, humming softly, barely above her breath lest she prematurely arouse her aged father.

But, Jonathan Applebee had never been a sluggard, nor had his habits

changed with growing age, and the old gentleman was out of bed almost as soon as his fair daughter.

Having breakfast nearly ready, Nell took the bucket and left the house for the spring near which Major Dix Piety had come under the doctor's hands on a certain occasion.

Dipping up a pail of the cool and sparkling water, Nell paused for a brief space, hands on trim waist as she slowly gazed around, drawing in long, full breaths of the odorous mountain air.

Almost perfectly happy, it was thoughts of handsome Frank Fitch which brought that smile to her red lips.

Only to be banished the next instant as her gaze caught sight of several rough-clad, thoroughly armed men stealing toward the cabin, almost surely on mischief bent!

For a brief space the maiden stood like one spell-bound; then, at thought of her aged father alone in the cabin, a wild scream burst from her lips.

"Father! Shut the door! Danger, father!"

So much by way of warning, but before she could take more than a half dozen steps in flight toward the cabin, a tall ruffian sprung upon her from ambush, his grip closing upon her shrinking shape:

"Quiet, ye durn squall-cat! Shet up or I'll—"

Jonathan Applebee heard that wild cry with the words which followed so close upon the warning, and rushed to the open door in great excitement.

He saw Nell just as the desperado caught the girl, and the sight of her unavailing struggles as she tried to break away from the ruffian, turned his sluggish blood to fire in his veins.

With a celerity hardly to be expected in one so aged and apparently decrepid, Applebee rushed back to where his rifle hung against the wall, snatching it from the hooks and leaping back to the door, even as he worked lever to throw a cartridge into the firing-chamber.

Butt of rifle touched shoulder as the old man came to the doorway, and with the old skill which had often sent a single bullet through heart of bounding deer, his weapon barked spitefully.

Without a cry or moan the ruffian who had assailed Nell near the spring let go his hold, spinning half-way around, to fall like a log upon his face with bullet-bored brain.

At almost the same instant other shots were fired by the armed thugs, and, struck by one of the missiles which, fortunately, but glanced the skull, Applebee dropped in his tracks like one smitten by a lightning-bolt.

All this took place with dizzying rapidity, and Nell scarcely realized that she was free, ere she saw her father go down before that irregular volley, then found herself once more in harsh clutches.

With savage yells, the road-raiders made their rush, finding that no other defense was made, since father and daughter had been alone in the cabin, Speed Harness being away on business of his own that morning.

Jonathan Applebee, looking like one dead, with the blood flowing from that wound above his temple, was dragged out of the way, as useless carrion; then the outlaws made rapid but thorough search of the place, turning everything over and almost turning the cabin itself "inside out" in their fierce lust for valuable finds.

One of the gang, who seemed to be in command, tried to frighten a full confession from Nell Applebee, but the poor girl seemed fairly dazed by the fall of her parent, and could only give back broken and hardly coherent answers to his questions.

His main object appeared to be the money-box taken from Major Dix Piety, but his queries, like the search of his fellows, failed entirely.

When roused to a partial understand-

ing of the case, Nell faintly declared that she was in complete ignorance, never having seen the box itself and hearing of it only incidentally.

In vain were threats and coaxing; Nell could only moan in her misery and shake her head in negation.

Then, when the cabin had been most thoroughly ransacked in every nook and corner without finding aught of the missing treasure-box, the road-raiders gave over the quest as useless.

Consultation between the more prominent members of the gang, then he who had all along seemed to act as leader of ceremonies once again approached poor Nell, who was crouching by the side of her still senseless father, almost overcome by grief at his supposed death.

"It's the last show you'll have given ye, gal," he said, with grim emphasis. "P'int out the boodle, an' we'll leave you right here with your Pap; but if not—say you will turn it up?"

Poor Nell looking up at that darkly forbidding face, shook her head, murmuring:

"I don't—I can't, sir! If I knew—oh, father, wake up and—"

"Oh, durn yer Pap an' you too!" and the ruffian, grasping the girl, rudely jerked her away from the motionless body.

Dazed, Nell made but a faint struggle as she was forced out of the cabin and away toward the spot where the road-raiders had left their horses.

Only for the stupor affecting her, Nell might have had another chance given her, for Jack Haltern was glaring that way, hands gripping revolvers and heart leaping fiercely; but, as Nell made no struggle, and showed no desire to break away from those clutches, Maupin was able to hold his comrade in check for the time being.

When the horses were reached the leader of the marauders turned Nell over to one of his fellows for the moment, mounting horse and then signing for the captive to be handed him again.

Even as he did this, one of the outlaws, who had lingered behind his mates for some reason or other, came that way with a cry which attracted all eyes to himself, whereupon he spluttered forth:

"The old cuss hain't croaked, mates. I jest seen him open peeper, an' hyst head a bit! Hope may die ef—"

The leader again resigned the maiden to his fellow, leaping from saddle and hurrying back to the cabin as though unwilling to trust other witnesses than his own senses.

They were not long in assuring him the report was true, and after looking more carefully into the nature of the old man's hurts, questioning him in vain concerning the missing money-box, the road-raider bade his men take Applebee along with the girl, both prisoners.

Nell's delight may be imagined, but defies description.

Now that the start had been fairly made, Jonathan Applebee rallied remarkably fast, and in a few minutes seemed almost as well as before receiving that well-nigh death-shot.

With father and daughter both mounted, an outlaw seated behind each, the better to keep them safely, progress was made through the hills as rapidly as might be their faces turned away from Nicodemus and the few friends toward whom the poor prisoners might look for aid and rescue.

For something more than an hour that retreat was pressed as rapidly as might be, just as though the marauders were expecting pursuit; then he who acted as leader called a halt in a snug-seeming retreat, yet one which gave no signs of former occupancy.

Leaving his fellows to look after the animals, the chief ruffian squared himself in front of the prisoners, brutal visage looking more than ever repulsive as he spoke:

"Look here, you critters! Business is business, an' that don't mean durn foolishness, nuther! Now hear me sing, will ye?"

"You know what was axed ye, back to the shack; whar's the boodle tuck away from Maje Piety? Eh?"

Nell shrunk closer to her father, shivering as she did so, yet hardly with fear so much as disgust and loathing.

More politic than his child, Jonathan made reply, but could only repeat what had already been said; he knew nothing whatever about the missing money-box.

"Ye lie, double-durn ye!" snarled the ruffian. "Even ef ye didn't take a hand in turning that trick, you know who did do it, an' right whar they planted the boodle to let the rumpus sort o' die over."

Both captives failed to convince that knave of their ignorance, and he poured forth threats too horrible for record here; but, instead of weakening the will of his victims the villain only succeeded in rousing the high spirit of the maiden.

"You foul-mouthed coward and cur!" she cried, casting aside all fears for herself, so intense was her indignation. "We have told you the truth, and nothing but the truth. You refuse to believe the truth, and pelt us with insults which—oh, you villain!"

"Peace, daughter!" said her father, fearing for the girl.

"For *your* sake, father, I'll say no more—but this! You shall answer for all this to Foot-Hills Frank, you coward!"

"An' *you* shell answer to the boss, pretty cat," grinned the outlaw.

"If master is equal to man—who is he, pray?"

"Well," hesitating briefly, "we call him Captain South!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"A FIGHT TO THE FINISH, NOW?"

Foot-Hills Frank recoiled from the mountain vagabond, much as a man might who had received a heavy blow in the face.

No possible combination of words could have given him a heavier shock, and for a brief space he seemed fairly stunned.

Then, grasping Harness by an arm and leading him to one side, urged:

"Now, out with it, pardner! The whole truth, man! Nell is—she is not—killed?"

"No; her nor the old gent, neither," Harness made haste to answer. "I made sure of so much, anyway!"

Frank was himself again. That one awful dread brushed away, he felt that he could bear all else.

"Go on, man! Explain! Where were you that you couldn't—"

Speed quickly explained that he had not spent the night in or near the shack.

He gave no excuse for his absence beyond the bare fact that business called him into the hills too far away to return home that night, but said that he was on his way there when, just after the day had fairly dawned, he was startled by the reports of firearms, coming from the direction of the Applebee cabin.

That mischief was in the wind, he realized, and hurried forward as quickly as possible, only to find himself too late to be of very much service to Jonathan or Nell Applebee.

He saw enough to convince himself that road-raiders were at the bottom of the ugly business, and that both Nell and her father were alive, seemingly well and unharmed, though prisoners under armed escort.

"And you let them be taken—you did, Speed Harness?"

"Waal, sir, they was only one o' me, while thar was a hull gang o' them," slowly replied the messenger of ill-tidings. "Still, I ain't sayin' but what I mought 'a' tried 'em a clatter, jest fer luck, only thar was the little lady to think of. Ef harm should come to her in the mix-up, what then?"

Frank, choking back a groan, gripped

tight one hand of the mountaineer as he said:

"You're right and I was wrong, Speed. I never stopped to think—I can't even begin to think while my Nell is—gods! To have it come just now, when I was away and unable to lift a hand in her defense!"

"That's pritty nigh the fust idee as hit me, pardner," declared Harness, face showing how thoroughly he sympathized with the half-distracted lover. "Thinks I, thar's Frank Fitch, an' the mo' sudden I gits to whar I kin meet up with him, the mo' smart I'm actin' of it! An' so, sir, you see—hyar I be!"

"Too nearly worn out to do more, worse luck!"

"Don't you think it, now!" almost indignantly cried Harness. "I'm as fit as I ever was, an' when you're ready so be I!"

The sergeant had listened to all this with undisguised interest, and now, as Foot-Hills Frank seemed on the point of turning away to immediately take steps for the rescue of his friends, the trooper spoke up as a man who fully means all he says.

"Count me in, Fitch! Just say what to do first, and I'm with you to the finish."

Foot-Hills Frank looked that way with a half-frown, then shaking his head as he made reply:

"I'm not asking you, sir. This isn't a matter of tactics and pipe-clay, but a fight to the finish between myself and those infernal road-raiders!"

Clutterbuck flushed at that retort, which he felt was scarcely justified by plain facts; but, instead of showing anger or even irritation, the veteran grimly spoke:

"That's all right, Mr. Fitch, if you can only make it seem so; but, one thing is dead-sure; you may lead the way, but we'll follow mighty hard upon your heels—until the gang is jumped. After that—lead my lads if you fairly can!"

Frank seemed about to retort angrily, but Speed Harness grasped an arm with warning squeeze, something in his dark eyes driving back those rash words.

A brief gaze, then Fitch yielded, though with hardly the best grace in the world.

"All right, sergeant, if you can stand the pace we'll set. Come, Speed: it's a fight to the bitter finish, now!"

"I'll pick up my men and be ready by the time you are, Fitch," said Clutterbuck, as the Fancy Sport hurried away in company with the messenger of evil tidings.

Just the hint of a frown gathered upon the sergeant's brows at this cavalier usage, but he hastened to get in readiness for the road his little troop of blue-backs, brought to Nicodemus for the purpose of taking in charge Dean Maupin and Reckless Jack Haltern in case those worthies could be found, thanks to Big Tom Damper.

As a general thing the Fancy Sport had precious little use for an equine among those foot-hills, often declaring that he could easily discount the best bit of horseflesh wrapped up in a hide, take the whole country as it lay.

But now he seemed to recant in toto, for his first move was to gain possession of a couple of good nags, sending Speed Harness around to the restaurant for a supply of provisions such as could be put together with little waste of precious time.

"Just scramble up what's within reach and tell 'em to charge it to my account, Speed. Hurry back to the stable, for I'll rack out just as soon as the nags can be got in readiness."

By thus dividing up the work to be done, little time was cut to waste, and then the two pards galloped out of Nicodemus, taking no other persons into their confidence.

Quickly as these preparations had been made, Sergeant Clutterbuck was in waiting with his little squad of troop-

ers, and without a word on either side the cavalymen fell in behind the two scouts, all riding away from the mining town at a steady lope.

Now that they were fairly under way and no valuable time would be lost through so doing, Foot-Hills Frank asked Harness for further particulars as to what he had seen, heard or done at the Applebee home.

Then, for the first time, Speed Harness mentioned the fact of at least one man having met death in that early raid.

"I see whar the blood was let out, free as a hog-killin', an' thar was the place whar a rude sort o' grave hed bin made; jest chucked into a holler, with a wheen o' dornicks an' bresh pitched over, fer to play common decency, I tuk it."

"And—you *did* see both Nell and her father?" asked Fitch, with far from steady tones.

"Yes," came the glad assurance. "I see 'em both, though they was already bein' tuck off, critter-back, an' too fur 'way fer me to stan' any show makin' a try to snatch 'em off."

"Must have been one of the raiders, then!" said Foot-Hills Frank, with a long breath of relief. "If they've mutilated his face too badly, that may give us a clew as to which gang turned the trick, Speed!"

"Which I was thinkin' pritty much the same thing, pardner!"

After this but few words were spoken, all energies being turned toward reaching the raided cabin as speedily as possible.

It still lacked considerable of being noon when the rescuing force caught their first glimpse of the Applebee shack, looking much the same as it ever did, yet feeling how differently!

Springing off their mounts, Frank and Harness turned their animals over to the soldiers for safe-keeping, then fell to work as only such men know how.

Harness pointed out the traces of blood where the outlaw had dropped dead at crack of Jonathan Applebee's rifle, then nodded toward the rude grave of which he had spoken.

"Shell we open that, fust-off, or look fer other sign 'crost whar I ketched last glimpse of the hounds, pardner?"

Foot-Hills Frank was spared the necessity of deciding, for Sergeant Clutterbuck had marvelously keen ears, and he instantly told off three of his men to do the work.

This left Speed Harness at liberty to study the trail itself, and after quartering the ground for a while, he gave a call which betokened a discovery of some description.

Foot-Hills Frank and the sergeant were quickly there, and the tracker pointed out the clear impress of a huge, peculiarly-shaped foot in soft dirt, grimly explaining the while:

"Thar's only one man-critter in all this yer region who totes sech a huff as that, gents, an' he is Mallet-foot, one of the whelps as trains with Captain North!"

"Then you believe 'twas that gang raided the shack, Speed?"

"I pritty nigh knows it, sir. An' ef —they've onkivered yen' cold meat, boss; ef *that's* from the same stable, then I reckon we kin be plum shore who we've got to pay off fer all this dirty work!"

Here, too, the shrewd scout proved to be correct in his reasonings, since Foot-Hills Frank, as well as Harness, recognized the dead man as having belonged to the Captain North gang of road-raiders.

Having settled this much, then, Fitch was all on fire to crowd the chase, once more crying, sternly:

"Come, now; down to work! It's a fight to the finish, now, and I'll never quit or balk until that dastardly outfit is wiped off he face of the earth, or sent up a tree at the end of a rope!"

Letting the soldiers care for their horses as well, the two pards followed

that trail swiftly enough to keep the animals in a trot, making no break until at least a couple of miles in all had been covered.

Then it was keen-eyed Speed Harness who made another important discovery, pointing out a human footprint while exclaiming:

"Wuss an' wuss, an' mo' of it, pardner! Look! That's the huff of Dean Maupin, or—Captain South: no less!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RIVAL ROAD-RAIDERS CLASH.

Speed Harness was perfectly correct in declaring that track to be made by the foot of the Nicodemus gambler, Dean Maupin.

Startled by the shots and cries coming from near the Applebee cabin, the two refugees from Nicodemus rushed on, pausing short as they saw what was taking place there on yonder slope.

Bold and reckless men as they were, ready at any time to give away a bit of odds, neither Maupin nor Haltern were fools in that particular sense; and the first glance showed them the worse than folly of attempting to assist the Applebees.

Only for Maupin Reckless Jack probably would have made a rash break of some description, especially when he beheld poor Nell feebly struggling in the clutches of that burly ruffian.

As it was, only a pledge to pursue the gang and improve the earliest opportunity of rescuing Nell served to keep that hot-head in quiet.

When the raiding gang rode off with their captives, the two pards struck out along their trail, and thus it came to pass that Dean Maupin left a couple of clear footprints behind himself for keen and shrewd eyes to decipher later in the day.

It proved to be a long and none too easy jaunt, but the trailers stuck doggedly to the work, finding it much less difficult than if they had been obliged to depend upon the trail alone. As it was, they could catch occasional glimpses of the road-raiders, while themselves keeping snugly hidden, and so went within at least a long rifle-shot of the finish.

The pause made by the head robber, to question father and daughter more closely concerning that missing money-box, permitted the pards to close in on the enemy, and to secure rest for their legs as well.

And so it came to pass that, when the gang reached their rendezvous, Maupin and Reckless Jack were not very far behind, and long before the afternoon had spent itself the daring spies had won a tolerably accurate idea of the retreat and its peculiarities, beside fixing upon a snug place for lying in wait.

There they felt they would be nearly insured against discovery by any of the North gang, while at the same time they could see pretty much all that was going on around the retreat.

Apparently the entire force of the North division was concentrated there, and even Reckless Jack could see how futile would be any hope of rescuing Nell Applebee while that day lasted; and so, waiting until the night was fairly fallen, the two pards made their first move.

That turned out to be different from the action contemplated, as well as vastly more important, all things considered.

Scarcely had the couple left their snug retreat than Dean Maupin gripped an arm tightly, muttering swiftly:

"Look, Jack! Somebody's coming, over yonder! If he should sight us before—"

"I'll see that he don't make any rum-pus, don't you worry, now!"

Without giving Maupin a chance to object, Reckless Jack glided away to intercept the course taken by that shape, crouching down back of a scrubby bush, making a swift and sure leap when the fellow drew within easy distance.

The two men fell to earth together, and Maupin hastened forward, knife in hand to help his partner; but Reckless Jack was choking off all outcry, plainly master of the situation.

Little by little the hampered struggles of the stranger grew weaker, to cease entirely a minute later; and not until then did either of the pards win a fair view of his face.

"Tom Damper, by glory!" ejaculated Maupin, as that black mask came away in his hands. "And—Captain North, for rocks, Jack!"

"I begin to reckon that same way, my own self," more equably spoke the victor, slackening his terrible grip by degrees. "Truss him up, anyway, pardner; maybe we can put him to better use than croaking!"

Maupin was already at work, and long ere he could rally his senses Tom Damper was bound hand and foot.

Between them, the pards found it no very difficult matter to carry their captive to a snug place of hiding, fastening him to a couple of rocks so firmly as to place escape unaided wholly out of the question.

"If we were dead-sure Tom Damper is Captain North, I reckon we might make a dicker for the girl and her father," hinted Jack, knowing by instinct that Maupin would flatly reject any such idea.

And so it was. The gambler felt little interest in the other prisoners, save as a forlorn hope of finding that mysteriously missing money-box through them, while possession of Captain North (should their strong suspicions concerning Tom Damper prove well founded) was worth a modest little fortune in itself.

"Why, Jack, only let us get the fellow safely out of this and where we can pinch him in fine shape, he'll cough up his whole pile to buy off his worthless self! Don't you see, man, dear?"

But Reckless was stubborn. He had but a single aim in life, just now: to rescue Nell Applebee, the only woman he ever loved!

"Later on, if you like, and if we can get the girl free without giving up Damper in trade," was his final decision.

"But Nell comes first, and she's got to be freed before I even squint at anything else."

"All right, Jack; Nell goes," yielded Maupin, knowing that argument would be just so much time and breath wasted on this stubborn fellow. "We'll try the original scheme first, though. If we slip up on sneaking them out, then I reckon 'twill be time to run up a white flag for a parley and a trade."

After this decision had been reached, the wisdom of their preliminary work was quickly made manifest, since now the two daring knaves had only to avoid discovery by any of the road-raiders.

They already knew where the two prisoners were located, in a brush shanty built close against the wall of rock at the rear of the camp; and once past the mouth of that narrow opening, it proved to be no very difficult task to win a position close to the rude shelter itself.

The evening was still young when the two daring rascals crept up to that point; but they were acting wisely, after all.

Having won a position close to the brush shack, it was no difficult matter for the men to open communications with the captives, and Maupin performed that portion of the work, disguising his voice as he spoke in guarded whispers.

Without giving his name, or that of his companion, he said they came from Foot-Hills Frank, who was waiting hard by for the rescued captives.

Then, satisfied that none of the road-raiders were near enough to hear the faint noise he could not avoid making, Maupin opened a hole in the rear of the shanty, large enough for father and daughter to creep through.

Warning them to be cautious as bold, for a sound might prove fatal, Maupin led the way in retreat, keeping as much under cover as possible, closely followed by Nell and Applebee, with Reckless Jack fetching up the rear.

They had covered more than two-thirds of the way to the exit, when by pure chance Nell turned to look back, meeting the fiery gaze of Jack Haltern.

The surprise was so great—for Nell feared as well as hated the desperado who dared aspire to her love—that the maiden gave a cry of alarm, loud enough to call attention their way from several outlaws.

Maupin uttered an imprecation at this awkward happening, but Haltern caught Nell up in his arms, rushing desperately on toward the darkness beyond the narrow entrance, at the same time shouting aloud:

"Cut loose and shoot a way through the devils, pard! Shoot and run! We've got to make it—just got to make it!"

Maupin was swift to obey, and from either hand an ugly spurt of red fire leaped, while Reckless Jack contrived to utilize one hand after the same fashion.

Favored by the surprise, added to the death-yells and struggles of at least a couple of their number, the road-raiders faltered and lost their best chance; for, closely followed by Jonathan Applebee, who had eyes and thoughts for his beloved child alone, Reckless Jack led the way through that neck, Maupin fetching up the rear.

Yet the outlaws crowded the two pards too close and hard for them to make an actual race of it, and so, as their one hope for life, the pards climbed up to where they had left Tom Damper in bonds.

Unfortunately for them, perhaps, the tall ruffian had succeeded in rubbing that gag out of place, and now lifted his voice loudly:

"Help, men! Rush the devils! They've got me! I'm Captain North, and—close in, ye whelps!"

Flinging Nell behind him, where she would be well out of the way of bullets, Reckless Jack swiftly recharged his emptied revolver, at the same time crying out to Jonathan Applebee:

"Take that devil's guns, old man, and fight for Nell! Fight until we're all—better death than let her back into such hands!"

The two pards were both working revolvers swiftly and successfully, but Mr. Applebee caught enough to guide him aright, and, just as the mad charge of the outlaws grew most furious, he came to the front with a brace of barking pistols.

So hot was the defense that, in spite of the mad cries from their captive chief, the road-raiders recoiled, then turned in actual flight.

But, as they went, Dean Maupin reeled blindly back, gasping huskily:

"They've got me—got me hard, Jack, old man!"

With a fierce roar Haltern caught that falling form in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ALL FOR HIS PARD.

Thanks to the Indian-like skill of Speed Harness, the trail of the road-raiders was lifted almost as rapidly as Sergeant Clutterbuck and his troopers cared to ride over such broken ground.

But then, fiercely chafing against delay, picturing to himself the grief and suffering which might even then be crowding upon his loved one, Fitch "took bit in teeth" and ranged far ahead of that slow but sure tracker, hoping to strike the retreat of the North Gang, or at least hit off the trail far ahead.

And, in fact, to that very impatience on part of the lover was due the discovery, for the Fancy Sport caught sight of a far-off glow not unlike a star, save that it lay too low down with the rising range for a background.

Scarcely had the little company

reached that spot when shots and cries, only partially deadened by distance, warned them of trouble breaking loose below and beyond.

Foot-Hills Frank led the way, though Speed Harness kept close upon the sport's heels, while the troopers came after, one and all eager to take a hand in the affair.

Promptly acting though they were, one and all, the fierce fighting was over before they could quite reach the spot; but quite enough was seen and heard to give the two pards a fair idea of the situation so far as these recoiling ruffians were concerned.

"Take what ye kin an' kill what ye cain't!" sharply cried Speed Harness, setting the example.

"Surrender!" thundered Sergeant Clutterbuck, now fairly in his glory. "Throw down your guns and throw up your hands! Run or fight and we'll cut you down like reeds!"

One or two of the rabble came to grief, being too desperate or too badly frightened to yield at command, but the main force of outlaws were captured, the troopers quickly disarming and placing them beyond danger to either themselves or to others.

Foot-Hills Frank was placed partially out of the fight through his falling over one of the dead or dying road-agents, striking his head heavily against a rock, and when he rallied sufficiently to scramble to his feet and again face that bloody slope, Speed Harness caught and held him back, while hastily explaining the situation as he now saw it.

If there had been any room left for doubt, it would have vanished before the stern hail which came from the little fort above, just then.

"Flag of truce, you fellows down yonder!"

"Hark!" and Harness gripped his friend all the more tightly. "If that isn't Jack Haltern, I'll never—well, what is it you want, up yonder?"

"What sort of an outfit is it you've got down there, anyway?"

Foot-Hills Frank gave a savage cry as he recognized that voice.

"You devil!" he cried, hoarsely. "I'll kill you by inches, Jack Haltern, if you have hurt—where is she, my poor Nell?"

A brief silence; then that voice spoke again, changed perceptibly, yet still that of the reckless desperado.

"Miss Applebee is safe and unharmed, Foot-Hills, and so is her father, as they shall tell you with their own lips, on one condition."

"Name that condition, Jack Haltern."

"All right; but suppose we make one talking do for the whole job? And so—right here you have it, gentlemen!"

"The North Gang raided the Applebee ranch, and we only struck their trail too late to hinder, though we tried mighty hard to save."

"Now, both of your friends are sound and unhurt. You shall hear their own story, and if they make me out a liar, then the bargain's off and you can serve us as best likes ye. That's fair; isn't it, stranger?"

"So far, yes. Now, what do you ask for all this?"

"Not so mighty much, looking at it from your side of the fence, I reckon. Just swear you'll let my pard go clear—"

"Who is he, first? Name him, Jack Haltern!"

"I'll tell you what he is: hurt so bad that he's dying right now! Give him every chance, and he'll never live to see the sun rise again! So, swear that you'll let him draw his last breath in peace and quiet; say that you'll let me watch with him until the—the end comes; and then you can do what you please with me!"

"Is it Dean Maupin you mean, Jack Haltern?" asked Speed Harness.

"It's my pard, and that's enough to tell until the bargain's made," came the hoarsely stern retort. "Agree to what I'm asking—for my pard, not myself—"

and you shall have Nell and her father, safe. Refuse this, and you can—I swear by heaven and hell and all that lies between! I'll kill the whole outfit and die fighting ye to the last gasp! Now, gentlemen, take your choice!"

"Don't do it!" came a hoarse voice from back of the desperado. "He is alone; rush him! He can't—"

"Who's that talking?" sternly interposed Sergeant Clutterbuck.

"Captain North himself!" clearly answered Reckless Jack.

A brief silence; then Foot-Hills Frank lifted his voice to shout:

"Nell, dear girl! If you are within hearing of my voice—"

"Answer him, Miss Applebee!" distinctly spoke up Reckless Jack; and almost immediately the glad tidings was carried through the gloom by the voice Frank Fitch loved so well.

That proved sufficient, and Haltern was given the one and only pledge he demanded—that his friend might gasp away his life in peace.

As a matter of course, Foot-Hills Frank was the first one of the rescuing party up the blood-sprinkled slope, but Speed Harness trod very close at his heels, ready to strike or to fend in case mad jealousy should tempt Reckless Jack past endurance.

But, nothing of the sort was attempted. Haltern was found by the side of his dying pard, Dean Maupin, seemingly with eyes, ears, thoughts alone for him who had played his last card—to lose life and game, both!

When the true story of that daring rescue from the road-raiders' den, together with the desperate defense which followed, was fairly told, Foot-Hills Frank's first impulse was to offer his hand and honest apology to Jack Haltern, but the man merely looked up for a moment, shaking his head, then coldly saying:

"I've no open hand for you, Frank Fitch. If I gave you one, 'twould be in the shape of a fist. Now, go your ways, and leave me mine! When it's all over with—when I've said good-by to my pard, then you can take what's left."

Foot-Hills Frank said nothing further, for, as the fire-glow revealed that drawn and ghastly pale face, he knew the very minutes of Dean Maupin were numbered and swiftly passing.

Now and then low mutterings, with an occasional word or two which other ears could rightly interpret, came from those ashen lips; but only once did the dying criminal rouse up to what might be called a sense of his present surroundings.

Then he spoke the name of Sergeant Clutterbuck, and as the veteran came at call, he faintly smiled while saying:

"I foolishly—money-box—lost!"

Then, thinking ever of his pard, Reckless Jack briefly told how the trick had been played, and how the boodle was lost that same night.

And, just as the new day was dawning, Dean Maupin died!

Reckless Jack gently closed those eyes, pressed one kiss upon that brow, then slowly rose to his feet, holding forth his hands to grimly say:

"Here I am, gentlemen; do your work with rope, bullet or steel—quick!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

CLEARING ALL ACCOUNTS.

There was no room left for doubting the perfect sincerity with which Haltern spoke, or that he fully expected to be disposed of without ceremony; but such was not to be the case.

When the little cavalcade moved away from that place, the sun was riding high in the heavens, and with them went two important prisoners—Jack Haltern and Tom Dampier, alias Captain North.

As being the nearest point on their route to Nicodemus, the party headed as directly as might be for the Applebee home, reaching there in safety only a little while before the sun set.

The prisoners, with the single exception of Jack Haltern, were turned over to the troopers for safe guarding, but Sergeant Clutterbuck formed one of the little council which gathered within the mountain cabin, there to finally determine the fate of Reckless Jack.

Nell Applebee bravely pleaded his cause, and Foot-Hills Frank, feeling too entirely happy in her safety now to go contrary to the wishes of his betrothed, seconded the motion when Nell begged for mercy.

Jack Haltern refused to plead for himself, shaking head and moodily frowning whenever asked to give pledge or promise.

But, when Nell carried her point, and with tears in her big, kind eyes, grasped those rough hands between her own, telling the outlaw that he was free to go whither he willed, Reckless Jack fairly broke down, and as he kissed her hands, two tears showed upon them.

"I'll promise you, Miss Nell, what I'd rather die than tell them that I'll try my level best to lead a different life from now on. And—but I can't say it. He'll taste heaven quick enough and—heaven bless you, anyway!"

With eyes so dimmed that he stumbled while crossing that threshold Jack Haltern passed away, never more to cross the life-path of those he hated so hotly, or loved so fiercely.

Scarcely had the released prisoner disappeared from view of those looking after him, than the sound of hoofstrokes were heard, drawing all eyes in the direction opposite.

Speed Harness gave a low ejaculation; Foot-Hills Frank frowned and came perilously near letting fall an execration; while Sergeant Clutterbuck at once left the little group, to rejoin his men on guard over the road-raiders, lifting hand in salute and standing stiffly at attention as Major Dix Piety rode up to the cabin.

The major looked flushed and somewhat embarrassed as he encountered those varying faces—that of Nell half-mischievous, that of Jonathan Applebee grave and dignified, that of the Fancy Sport stern and forbidding, while Speed Harness once more looked and acted the sluggish, lazy, half-witted mountain vagabond.

In all probability Major Dix Piety never faced a more difficult task, nor one which called for a greater degree of manhood than this; but, after all, the paymaster was a gentleman at bottom, and proved himself such right then and there.

Never mind just what he said, or how he said it.

Enough that he frankly and honestly apologized for his words and actions of that day, begging that the main blame be placed where it belonged—upon the "snake" which bit him, together with the whisky which he swallowed to fight one poison with another.

Enough that Nell graciously granted the pardon asked, begging that no more be said about the unfortunate affair.

And Foot-Hills Frank, too happy to hold a grudge against even his bitterest enemy that day, grasped the pudgy hand of the fat paymaster, shaking and wringing it so heartily that Major Piety with utmost difficulty could choke back a howl and a curse in place of the regulation acknowledgment!

Then, on hospitable thoughts intent, Pretty Nell whispered to her lover, who lost no time in seeing that the cabin was vacated sufficiently to give her room for exercising her culinary abilities, he taking Major Piety over to inspect the prisoners and to hear in detail the wonderful events which had taken place since his sending Sergeant Clutterbuck to Nicodemus with Big Tom Dampier as guide to effect the capture of the two daring robbers who had played him such an abominable trick at Blacktail Springs.

The night had fairly set in when Nell and her aids (father and Speed Harness)

completed arrangements for supper, and among those first to respond was Major Dix Piety.

Blushing Nell motioned him to take the head of the table, which had been spread for "the elect."

And when the meal was near its end, Speed Harness came into that crowded room, both hands behind his back, until he was at the major's elbow, when, without sound or warning, he plumped that missing money-box down in front of the amazed paymaster!

For many minutes explanation was impossible, so thorough was the surprise, so great was the excitement thus aroused; for never another one among them all so much as dreamed that this mountain vagabond had possession of the stolen treasure!

Still, when Speed Harness was given a fair chance to explain, he cleared away the mystery quickly enough, using very few words in making all clear.

He had kindled the little fire, the glow of which proved so detrimental to the hopes of Captain South and Reckless Jack; for, while they were crawling upon the fire, Harness was taking stock of their possessions.

He found the money-box secured to one of the saddles, and instantly divined what it contained.

Taking the precious package, Speed mounted one of the horses, leading the other, riding recklessly away as though the beasts had stampeded.

When sufficiently far to feel secure from detection, he dismounted, sent both horses off at speed in different directions, then hurried away to a retreat best known to himself.

It had been his intention to restore the money-box at the first fair opportunity, but events which transpired—chief among which was the "bad break" made by the doughty major himself—changed his mind, and the mystery remained a mystery up to the present hour.

Speed Harness also revealed to the company who and what he was—a detective in the employ of the government, come to that section to look into the many hold-ups made by the road-rivals, Captains North and South, in some of which the mail had been rifled.

He had made a partial confidant of Foot-Hills Frank alone, his kindly reception by the Applebees being due to his being a member of the same secret society with which Jonathan affiliated.

Major Dix Piety gave thanks to all concerned in the restoration of his money-box, but (being now entirely sober) was too much of a gentleman to openly speak of or offer a monetary reward.

With that one dark enigma fairly explained, there remains but little more to say.

Enough that "Captain North" and his henchmen were brought to trial, found guilty and sentenced as their various degrees of guilt deserved.

The body of "Captain South," or Dean Maupin, was secretly removed, by or through the wishes of Jack Haltern, it was generally believed.

Speed Harness was suitably rewarded by Major Piety, and moved on to other scenes and momentous events.

Foot-Hills Frank, using her recent perils as an argument, induced Pretty Nell to complete his happiness by marriage, so that he could be ever at hand to guard and—"keep her from running away with uglier men!"

And—in due course of time that invitation—"for two"—came to the young married couple, and they "took a day off" just to run East and witness the wedding of Rosamond Watkins.

THE END.

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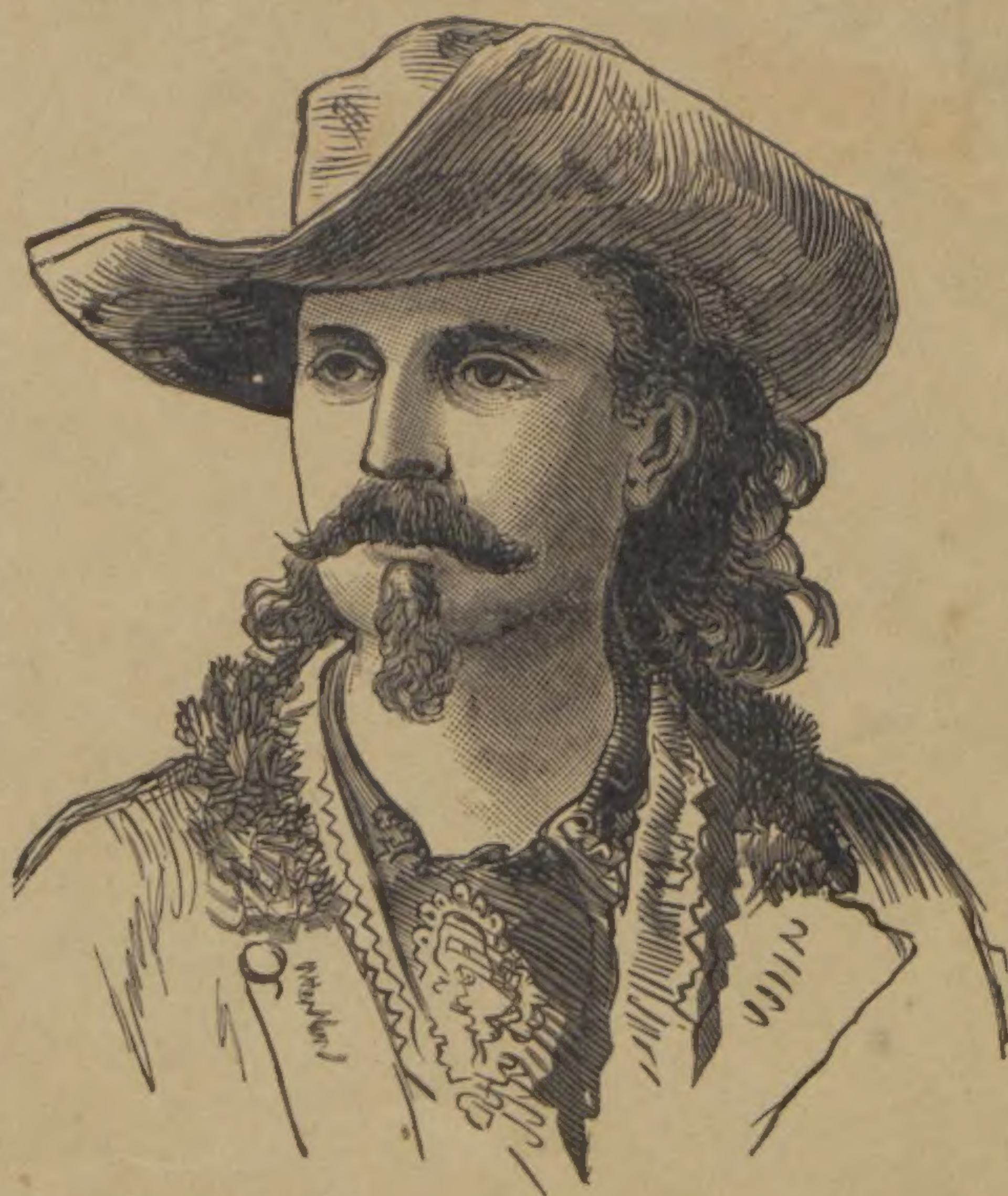
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